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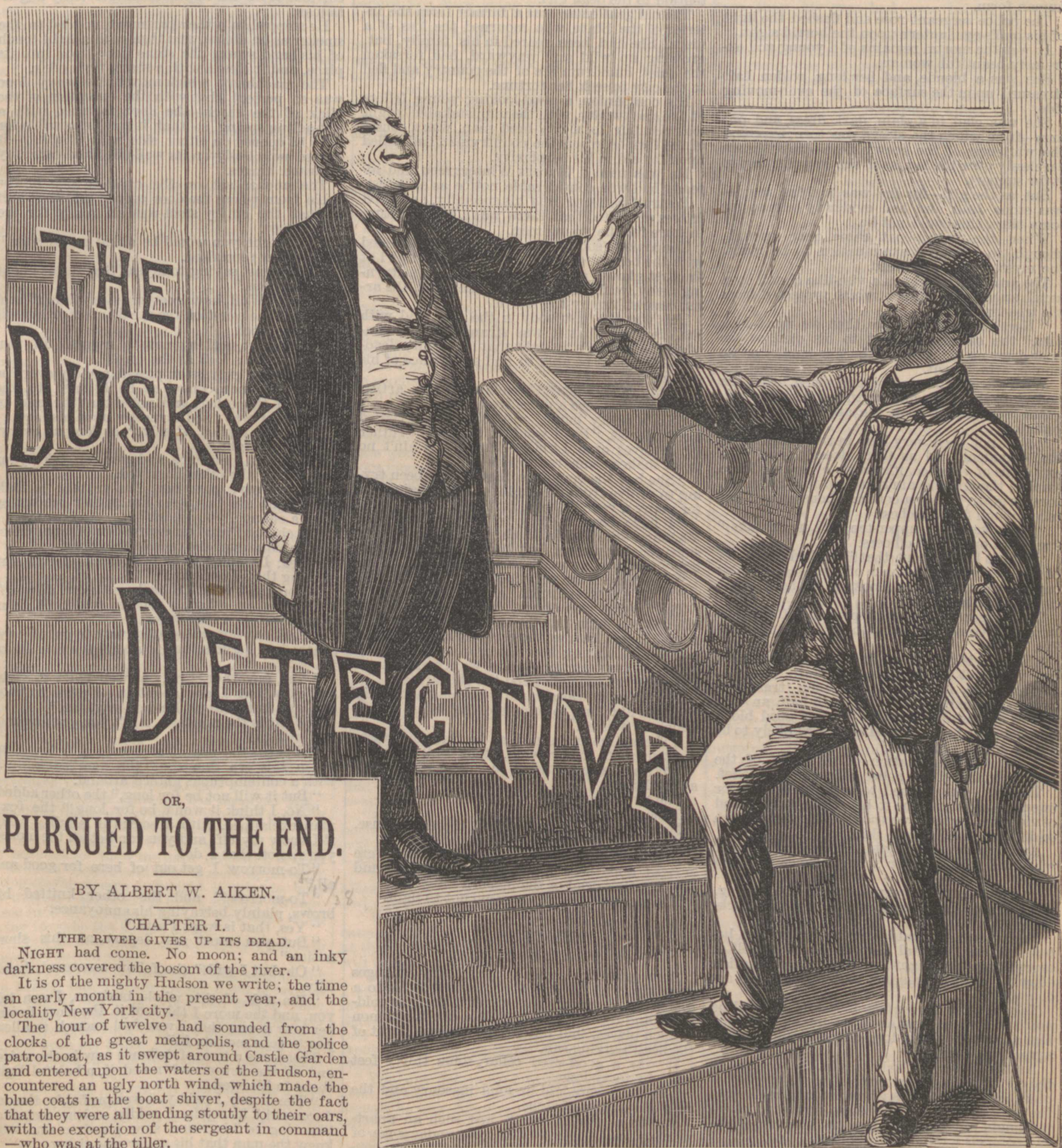
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OR, PURSUED TO THE END.

BY ALBERT W. AIKEN.

CHAPTER I.

THE RIVER GIVES UP ITS DEAD.

NIGHT had come. No moon; and an inky darkness covered the bosom of the river.

It is of the mighty Hudson we write; the time an early month in the present year, and the locality New York city.

The hour of twelve had sounded from the clocks of the great metropolis, and the police patrol-boat, as it swept around Castle Garden and entered upon the waters of the Hudson, encountered an ugly north wind, which made the blue coats in the boat shiver, despite the fact that they were all bending stoutly to their oars, with the exception of the sergeant in command—who was at the tiller.

"It's a mighty rough night, boys!" he exclaimed, as the chilly blast struck him.

"OHO! SORRA A BIT OF YER SILVER DO I WANT—NOT A PIECE OF IT SHALL CROSS MY HAND!"

The oarsmen were a little better off, as they had their backs to the wind.

"Ay, ay!" grunted the patrolmen.

"This river business isn't what it is cracked up to be, by a jugfull," the officer continued. "It's all right in pleasant weather, but on a night like this shore service is a durned sight more agreeable."

"And it's a sheer waste of time, too, for on such a night as this the toughest river rat would be apt to lie low, unless there was a chance of catching the biggest kind of a boodle."

"Yes, yes; that's so," replied the men, in a kind of chorus. Every one of them would have given a day's pay to have spent the rest of the night on shore.

The boat sped rapidly through the dark water, for the tide was favorable, if the wind was not.

The officer steered the craft by reference to the light on shore, aiming to keep almost a hundred feet out from the end of the piers.

It had been a quiet night for the patrol-boat; for not a single incident worthy of mention had arrived since the trip had begun, but now, just as the boat came to the ferry slip of the Central New Jersey Railway, the huge lantern burning upon the extreme end of the outermost pier cast its light upon the waters, and on the edge of the circle of the rays was a dark object that attracted the attention of the vigilant sergeant.

It was a portion of a tree-trunk, nearly a foot in diameter and almost ten feet long, and, supported by this piece of floating timber, was a human form.

The police sergeant rose and flashed the light of his bull's-eye lantern upon the horrid sight.

It was the mortal remains of a young and extremely beautiful woman.

She was a blonde, and her long, golden hair streamed upon the surface of the ever-moving tide.

She was clad in a plain, dark dress, and one arm—from which the sleeve was torn, exposing the whiteness of the snowy flesh—was thrown carelessly over the log, as if she was clinging to it for support.

But, as the girl—for she was nothing more—was stone dead, and had evidently been so for some time, this could not be.

When the patrol-boat came near enough, though, to allow an examination to be made, the mystery was explained.

The arm was caught in a vise-like clutch by a small stump of a branch which projected from the tree-trunk.

"Here's a mystery, boys, that we must look into," the officer remarked to his men as the boat drew up alongside of the tree-trunk and its human attachment.

With careful hands the policemen lifted the body into the boat, and, as they did so, the sergeant commented upon the appearance of the remains.

"She's not been very long in the water, boys, that's evident, and as there doesn't seem to be any signs of violence, it's pretty clear that it's a suicide, though she ain't dressed for the street, for this gown is only a common house-dress; but nice enough for a duchess."

"She's one of the upper-ten, and no mistake," suggested one of the officers.

"I don't know about that!" replied the chief of the party with a shake of the head. "You can't always tell by the looks of the horse what class he kin trot in."

The sergeant was a great sport and often interlarded his conversation with striking turf similes.

"The gal is rigged out in a nice enough dress, but you can't tell anything by that."

"She's no mean, low, common trash, of course; anybody kin see that with half an eye; there's no mistake about her having good blood into her; but for all that she's just as likely to be a poor gal as a rich one."

A careful examination of this waif of the waves confirmed the police officer in his belief.

The girl—she seemed to be only eighteen or twenty—had not come to her death by the hand of violence, for there was not the slightest scratch to disfigure the delicate skin.

And there wasn't anything to indicate who or what the girl was, or from whence she had come.

She wore no jewelry, not even a finger-ring, and there wasn't a single article in the one pocket of the dress.

It was as if she had taken the precaution before taking the fatal leap, to divest herself of everything that might lead to her identification after the swift plunge into eternity had been accomplished.

This was the sergeant's idea and he said as much to his men, and as his command regarded him as a particularly long-headed man they all agreed with him.

An hour later the body was in the morgue, as the city dead-house is termed, where the bodies of all the unfortunates whose remains come into the possession of the police are deposited, there to remain until identified, or the progress of decay compels a removal to Potter's Field.

The reporters for the daily newspapers ghoulishly, haunt the morgue at regular intervals hungry for sensational items.

But there was scant chance for their busy pencils in the case of this beautiful unfortunate.

Apart from her beauty, there wasn't anything to distinguish her from the hundred or more of women whose bodies are cast up by the remorseless waves which completely encircle the great metropolis of the New World.

She was neatly dressed and showed no signs of having been forced to take the dread plunge in the dark by the pressure of dire necessity.

So all the morning journals contained in reference to the finding of the body was a brief notice.

"The police patrol-boat last night picked up the body of a girl of eighteen or twenty, in the North river. She was neatly attired; there were no marks of violence, and it is apparently a case of

'One more unfortunate, rashly importunate.' The body is at the morgue awaiting identification."

Attracted by the notice quite a number of people who chanced to be in search of lost girls, visited the dead-house, anxious to ascertain if the unknown girl was the one of whom they were in search.

But none of these seekers after knowledge identified the girl; in fact, in spite of her beauty, few of them cast a second glance at her face, after ascertaining that she was not the one they sought; but there was one couple who arrived late in the afternoon, an old man, bent with age and toil, and a young one, right in the pride of vigorous manhood, who paid particular attention to the dead girl.

The old gentleman was a farmer from the interior of the State who mourned the loss of a niece. She had been reared in his family, but, growing up wild and wayward, had forsaken the quiet, humdrum life of the country and fled to the city to seek her fortune.

His companion, a good-looking young fellow of five and twenty, with the unmistakable bright look peculiar to a city-bred man, was a cousin of the former, whom the countryman had called upon for aid in his perplexity.

He was named Marcus Wintergreen and already had won considerable notice as an artist.

Portrait-painting was his specialty, and good judges predicted that there was a bright future in store for the young man.

The artistic soul of the painter was impressed with the beauty of the face of the dead girl at the first glance, and as his companion was turning away, with a sad shake of the head, the artist caught him by the sleeve.

This was the last body in the row, and with the discovery that it was strange to him vanished the farmer's thought that in the city dead-house he might be able to find some trace of his missing girl.

"Stay a moment!" exclaimed the artist. "Did you ever see a more beautiful girl?"

"She's pooty enuff," responded the grizzled agriculturist, "but I would a heap sight ruther git my eyes onto Lizzie, although she ain't no great shakes compared to this girl."

"She has the very face that I have been trying to evolve from the depths of my imagination for many a year!" the artist cried.

"I have been wishing to try my hand at a Madonna—the Virgin Mother, you know—ever since the day when I first discovered that I was likely to make my mark as an artist."

"And here is the very face!"

"Wait a moment until I sketch it!"

The morgue was almost deserted; one of the attendants lounged at the entrance talking with a friend, and besides these two, busy in conversation—calculating how the ward was going to go at the next election—there wasn't any one in the place but the artist and the old farmer.

Wintergreen was a rapid workman and it did not take him long to complete the slight sketch which he desired.

"There!" he exclaimed, as he put the finishing touches to the drawing, "that is all I want."

"With this as a guide I can paint the picture at my leisure."

The two departed.

Time passed on.

Many an anxious soul visited the dead-house, but no one claimed or identified the girl.

And so to the Potter's Field the remains were carried and there found a resting-place amid the countless dead of the modern Babylon.

The secret of the waves came not to light.

CHAPTER II.

THE PLOTTERS.

AND now the scene of our story changes abruptly from the streets of the metropolis to a gloomy underground apartment, dark as midnight and reeking with the foul smells common to such places, shut out from the blessed light of the health-giving sun.

It was a good-sized cellar, some thirty feet wide by forty long.

The walls were laid in solid masonry and the ceiling was also of stone.

It was a regular vault, just such an apartment as has been known to exist under some of the ancient castles of Europe, used for the concealment of the treasures of the robber lords, the castle's masters, and also as a dungeon for

the safe-keeping of the captives whom avarice or revenge doomed to a living death.

There were no windows or doors visible either in walls or ceiling, and it seemed a riddle how any one got into or out of the apartment.

But there was clearly some mode of entrance, for a man sat by a rude table, which was in the center of the apartment, a lighted candle burning upon it, smoking a pipe.

The table and two stools, one of which the man occupied, were the only articles of furniture in the vault.

This solitary individual who sat so contentedly enjoying the flavor of the rank, vile-smelling tobacco with which the pipe was filled, was a medium-sized man, plainly dressed, with a rather ill-favored face.

There was a foxy expression about the man's features, and a good judge of mankind would have set him down for a fellow upon whom it would be well to keep a wary eye.

"It must be about time for my gentleman to make his appearance," the smoker soliloquized as he consulted a small silver watch which he drew from his pocket.

"Eight o'clock, he said, and it is ten minutes past the hour," the man continued. "He is generally punctual to the minute."

Hardly had the words left his lips when some of the apparently solid blocks of stone swung noiselessly out from the wall, disclosing a narrow, dark passageway.

In the opening stood a medium-sized, well-built man of forty or forty-five, nicely dressed, and from all appearances evidently a gentleman.

He stepped in'o the apartment, nodded to the smoker as he did so, and then with a light touch of his hand swung the stone door back into its place, and it closed with a sharp little click.

The machinery which moved the heavy door was so perfect that with the exception of the click of the catch—the door fastened with a self-acting spring, so that it was impossible for it to be opened on either side without a key—it moved noiselessly on its well-oiled and carefully adjusted hinges.

The smoker sat on the opposite side of the table from where the door opened into the vault so that the empty stool was all ready for the new-comer.

"I thought you would be along pretty soon," the smoker remarked.

"I was just saying to myself that it was about time for you."

"Yes? Well, how goes on everything?" and as he put the question the speaker seated himself upon the stool.

"All right; nothing new to report. Do you want to take a look at the bird?"

A peculiar expression passed rapidly over the face of the new-comer as he listened to the words of the other, and noted that the gaze of the speaker was fixed earnestly upon his face.

"No," he replied, slowly, "as long as everything is all right."

"Right as ninepence, and you can take your oath on it," the other observed.

"But I say, governor, I'm getting a little sick of this 'ere business; I'm rather hankering after a change, you know."

"A change?" and an expression of annoyance shot rapidly over the face of the other.

"Yes; I think I've had about all of this sort of thing that I care for."

"You don't want to back out now, do you?" the gentleman asked, a tone of contempt plainly perceptible in his voice.

"Back out is a rather ugly way to put it, governor; but I guess that is about the English of it."

"Yes, governor, I may as well blurt it right out, now that I am about it. I want to back out, and in the worst kind of way, too."

"What is the matter? Ain't you getting money enough?"

"What is the use of money to a fellow shut up in this 'ere dungeon?" the man exclaimed, with a contemptuous glance around.

"But it will not be for long," the other added.

"No, I think it won't be for long!" the foxy man exclaimed, with a scornful laugh. "Not if I know myself, and you can bet all the money you've got, that I do!"

"To-morrow I get out of here for good and all."

"To-morrow?" and the other knitted his brows, plainly betraying his annoyance.

"Yes, that is what I said!"

"But you must not depart at this short notice."

"Oh, but I will!" the fellow answered decidedly.

"I'm sick of this whole business, I can tell you, and the more I think of it, the more I wonder how it was that I was fool enough to allow you to rope me into it."

There was a tone of defiance now in the voice, and as the new-comer noted it, a baleful light shone in his eyes.

"The money I paid you was probably the inducement," he rejoined, coldly, a clear, metallic-like ring to his voice, sure proof to one who knew the man that his anger was rising.

"Oh, of course I'm not donkey enough to make any bones about the matter. You bought

me with your gold. There isn't any mistake about that, but when I come to think the matter over, I wonder that I was fool enough to sell myself so cheap."

"You set your own price and I paid it," observed the other.

"True enough, but I didn't rightly calculate what the thing was worth; since I have been shut up here, though, in this dismal hole with no company but my pipe and my thoughts, I have had a chance to get at the rights of the matter, and I see now that I ought to have had a good deal more money than I got."

The other made an impatient gesture.

"All this means, I suppose, that you want me to pay you more money," he remarked.

"Well, yes, I am rather squinting that way, but that isn't all!"

"No?"

"No, sir, not by a jugfull!" exclaimed the man, decidedly.

"The fact is, I am tired of the whole business and I want to get out."

"Are you afraid of a discovery? If so, let me tell you that there isn't the least danger of it. No one has the slightest suspicion of the truth."

"The tale I concocted has imposed on everyone, and by a lucky chapter of accidents, even the shrewd-eyed detective officers who were called into the case, have been led away on a false scent."

"So you see, there is not the least possibility of the plot being discovered."

"Oh, no, I wasn't worried about that," the other remarked, replacing his pipe in his mouth and taking a few vigorous pulls at it.

"You fixed the matter right up to the handle and everything has worked like machinery, but as I told you I am sick of the whole thing and I don't want to have any more to do with it."

"I want to get out for good and all!"

"Suppose I insist upon holding you to your bargain?" the other asked, a dangerous look in his eyes.

"Four words to that; I won't be held!" cried the man, defiantly.

"You wish to quarrel with me then?"

"Oh, no, not unless you try to stop me and then of course I will have to. Don't you make any mistake about it! I'm tired and I'm going to quit!"

"I'm going to leave the country and go back home. You have already paid me a tidy sum and now if you could see your way clear to give me about five thousand more I think I would be satisfied."

"I'll go over to England and open a neat little public-house in some good quarter and settle down for the rest of my life."

The brow of the listener was dark and his eyes flashed angry fires as he leaned his elbows upon the table and gazed intently into the face of the other.

"You have made up your mind to blackmail me then!" he exclaimed, angrily. "You think that I am in your power and you are resolved to put the screws on."

"Well, there isn't much doubt that I have got you in a rayther tight place," the fellow responded with an exulting grin.

"You are in my power and no mistake."

"You have made a rich haul, thanks to my assistance, and I think it is only fair I should have a good share of the swag."

CHAPTER III.

A DESPERATE DEVICE.

"You scoundrel!" hissed the man, who was evidently the master, from between his clinched teeth.

"No more scoundrel than you are!" retorted the other, in no ways dismayed by the threatening looks of the man who faced him so angrily.

"Perhaps you think that I don't know you, but I do. I knew you across the water years ago, and as I've a wonderful memory for faces I recognized you the moment I saw you."

"Absurd! your memory has deceived you," responded the other, evidently troubled more by the declaration than he cared to show.

"Oh, no, it hasn't. Of course it was none of my business to 'blow the gaff' on you; I've been in 'trouble' myself and as you were apparently acting on the square I thought it wise to hold my tongue. It appeared to me mighty strange to see such an out and outer as you used to be trying to come the honest dodge."

"I had an idea that you were up to some deep game and so you were."

"I let you rope me into the thing as innocent as a baby, but I made up my mind to have a good pull at the swag when the proper time came and I think we are pretty near that pint now, so you just fork over five thousand dollars and I'll wash my hands clean of the whole business and cross the herring pond to old England again."

"I had to get out mighty sudden when I left home, but as that was twenty years ago, I'm not likely to be troubled now in regard to the past."

"But you couldn't go back, you know, for if you did you would run your neck into a halter."

"I was present at your trial when you were

convicted of murder, and if you hadn't been lucky enough to break jail and gone leg bail, you would have danced a lively hornpipe upon nothing twenty odd years ago."

"You are talking nonsense!" the other exclaimed, impatiently.

"No, I'm not, and you know it," retorted the smoker, contemptuously.

"You have changed a good deal of course; you are twenty years older—you were only a boy then—you have grown stouter and your face is not so smooth as it was in those old days when as a poacher you defied the gamekeepers and finally killed one of them in a hand-to-hand fight, but I know you, Gypsy Wolf!"

"Gypsy Wolf?" said the other in a tone of question.

"Yes, that is what you were called, and it isn't of the least use for you to deny it."

"Wolf was your surname, your other one I don't know, for I never heard you called anything but Gypsy Wolf."

"I have been laying low for you ever since I discovered who you were, for I made up my mind that you were up to some deep game."

"Your wisdom is truly wonderful," observed the master scoundrel, who bore such a peculiar name, with a sneer.

"Oh, yes," responded the other with a dry chuckle, indicative of complete satisfaction.

"I think I can see as far into a mill-stone as the next man."

"There's an old saying that what's bred in the bone must come out of the flesh and I didn't believe you were going to prove any exception to the rule."

"It is your nature to prey upon your fellow-man and there isn't the least doubt in my mind that you will carry on the game while there is breath in your body!"

"To look at you one would never believe that you possessed such excellent judgment; but come, we have had talk enough so let us get down to business," the Gypsy Wolf remarked.

"Now you are talking," observed the foxy fellow. "I'm just old business, every time."

"Suppose I pay you this sum that you demand, how long do you think it will last you?"

"Oh, with such a start I am safe for life!" the other replied, confidently.

"I don't doubt that you think so, but that is where your judgment, excellent as it is, is at fault."

"You are addicted to drink, and when you have the money in your pocket I doubt if your appetite for strong liquor can be controlled."

"If you open a public house, as you propose, the chances are about a thousand to one that you will be your best customer, and the gin palace where the landlord steadily drinks up all the profits, usually comes to grief in short order. I can readily foretell how the thing will end."

"After you get the money from me, you will try your speculation, fail in it, for it will be only a question of time, and then the first thing I know you will be back here, bothering me for more money."

"Oh, no!" the foxy man answered, immediately. "There won't be the least danger of that. You give me the money and I'll give you my word that you will never see me again, that is I mean I will never trouble you."

"You think so now, but when your money is gone, your ideas will change; you will say, 'Why should I be poor when my pal has plenty of cash?' and then back you will come to me."

"No, no, I cannot consent to expose myself to be blackmailed; if you need ready money I will help you along, but you must remain with me."

"Not another day!" the foxy man said, decidedly. "Didn't I tell you that I had all I wanted of such a life as this? Why, a man might as well be shut up in State Prison, and be done with it."

"No, sir; I want to get out of this hole as soon as possible."

"Everything is all arranged for the night, so that the bird will not need looking after until to-morrow."

"You pay me the money—I know that you have more than that paltry sum about you—I will levant, and before the morning light comes I will be far from here."

"It is impossible; for my own safety I cannot allow you to leave me until this matter is settled," the master replied, shortly.

"Why not have a little patience? The end cannot be far off. Wait; in a week—or a month at the most—you will be free to go. The danger will then be over."

"No, no, I'm not going to wait. To-morrow I must be a free man, and if you don't yield to my demand you must take the consequences, that's all," and in his excitement the speaker rose from his seat, and leaning over the table, shook his fist menacingly in the face of the other.

"You are determined to be ugly then, and make trouble?" the other remarked, slowly, as though he was debating the matter over in his mind.

"Yes, that is it exactly! I'm not the kind of man to be trifled with. I mean business every time, and the quicker you make up your mind to comply with my demand the better it will be

for you. I want the money, and I'm going to have it, too!"

"Would you betray me?" the master asked.

"Yes, in a minute if you don't come down with the swag!"

"Well, well, don't get excited; I am in your power, and of course must yield to your demand."

"Sit down and let us talk the matter over quietly. It won't do for you and I to quarrel."

A flush of triumph came over the face of the foxy fellow; he had not anticipated so easy a victory, and naturally was gratified by the unexpected result.

"Oh, I don't want to quarrel; no, not I," he replied. "I'm the easiest man in the world to get along with if I ain't crossed; but when I am, look out for squalls, for I am mighty apt to be ugly!"

And as he uttered the vaunt he stuck his thumbs in the arm-holes of his vest and beamed patronizingly upon the other.

He was completely off his guard, and this was the moment for which the other waited—the result for which he had strived.

As we have stated, he was seated on the stool, with his arms leaning on the table.

Suddenly, and without the least warning, he gave a mighty leap.

Head first he went across the table, and his hard skull struck the foxy man full in the stomach with such tremendous force that it doubled him up like a jackknife, and over backward he went, his head striking the hard earth with a whack that made him see more stars than his eyes had ever beheld in the heavens.

In his headlong leap across the table the assailant had extinguished the light, so that the apartment was plunged in utter darkness; but as the two men fell together, the foxy fellow under and the other on top, the disappearance of the light did not materially affect the plan of the attacker.

Although the overthrown man was partially stunned by the shock of the fall, and had the wind almost knocked out of him by the blow in the stomach, yet, comprehending that his life was at stake, he attempted to grapple with his assailant.

The attacker, though, was acting on a well-digested plan, and as the surprise had been complete, the assailed man really had no chance to offer successful resistance.

The moment the ground was reached, the assailant drew a revolver from his pocket, and, with the butt of the weapon, hammered his antagonist upon the head in a merciless manner.

The resistance of the other became less and less; he gasped and groaned, and soon sunk into insensibility.

The victory was complete.

Then, satisfied that his foe was either dead, or so near death's door that the time of his entering the dark portals would be only a question of a few minutes, the conqueror rose to his feet, produced his match-case, struck a light, and proceeded to hunt for the candle which had been so unceremoniously flung from the table.

The candle found, he relighted it, and again the apartment was illuminated.

"Now, to see if there is any life left in this scoundrel who was idiot enough to imagine that he could contend with such a man as I am!" the victor exclaimed.

"If the sense had not been crushed out of him, I think there isn't any doubt that by this time he would come to the conclusion that I was rightly named when men called me the Gypsy Wolf."

"He has felt my teeth, and claws, and can testify that they are the real articles."

Then he knelt by the side of the unconscious man, to find that he was not dead, although his wounds were frightful.

"The fellow has the skull of an ox," the victor muttered. "If he hadn't, he never would have been able to survive the blows I gave him."

"I thought I had settled him for this world, but I fancy the brute will live to trouble me."

Then he was silent for a moment, plunged into deep thought.

His meditations were evidently not pleasant ones, for there was an angry scowl upon his resolute face.

"I have gone too far in this business to retreat now," he murmured at last.

"Why should I hesitate at such a moment as this at a little more blood, when it is necessary to secure the booty which is now within my grasp?"

"This fellow is as good as dead. If I drop him down the old well yonder, that will be the last of him until the judgment day, and then in regard to the other, all I have to do is to abandon this place and come here no more."

"Thirst and starvation will do my work as well as bludgeon or knife. Neither lead nor steel would be sure."

"That is my game, and I would be an idiot not to play it, when the winning cards are in my hand and success certain."

His mind determined, he immediately proceeded to carry out the plan.

He removed all the valuables from the person of his victim, and then dragged the senseless man to a distant corner of the room, where a

stout wooden cover concealed the mouth of an old well.

Down into the dark hole he thrust the body, and then replaced the cover.

"That settles him!" he cried; then, taking the candle, he opened the secret door.

"Farewell, old vault; you doubtless have hid many a crime in the old days, and now I trust my secret to your keeping!" he cried, as he swung the door toward him.

A second more and darkness reigned supreme.

CHAPTER IV. DOOMED.

THE Gypsy Wolf was right in his surmise; the man was not dead.

He had a head of iron, a skull of astonishing thickness, and in reality was not materially injured by the pounding he had received.

There was no water in the pit into which he had been thrown, although the hole had apparently been dug for a well.

It was about twenty feet deep, five feet in diameter, and was carefully walled with brick. These facts of course were not immediately apparent to the injured man.

He was in total darkness, and when he recovered his senses his first idea was that he was in the vault, where the interview ending with the struggle had taken place.

"He thinks he has settled me for good and all," he remarked, when his senses came back to him and he had sufficiently recovered from his swoon to sit up.

"But I think I will be able to show him that I am worth a dozen dead men!"

"He ought to have made sure of the job while he was about it, though, for he'll find out before he is many months older that I am the worst enemy he ever made."

"I must strike a light and get out of this before he returns, for he may take the notion into his head to come back, and if he tackles me again he might succeed better than in the first attempt."

"Luckily I've a case of matches in my pocket."

Then a bitter oath came from his lips.

He had thrust his hand into his pocket and discovered that he had been despoiled of his valuables.

"Curse the scoundrel!" He has added robbery to murder!" he cried.

"But I'll be even with him, if it takes all the rest of my life!"

The match-case had not been taken though, and as it was crammed full of wax matches he had no difficulty in striking a light.

Great was his astonishment as the light of the wax taper illuminated the pit and he comprehended where he was.

"Great heavens! I am in the well!" he cried.

There was no water in the pit, only soft mud at the bottom, which had broken his fall when he had been so unceremoniously dumped into the dark hole.

The man comprehended the game as well as though he had planned it himself.

"He didn't care whether I was alive or dead," he muttered. "He dumped me into this hole and calculated that would be the end of me, and by Satan and all his imps! I believe he calculated rightly too, for how can I escape?"

By this time his strength had returned sufficiently to allow him to get upon his feet and carefully he examined the smooth wall which encompassed him.

Indeed it seemed a hopeless task.

The wall had been carefully and truly built and now as the captive man ran his fingers over it, it seemed to him as smooth almost as glass.

"It is impossible! I am doomed!" he cried in agony.

"This cursed villain has entrapped me!"

"There isn't the least chance of escape open!"

Then he lit another wax taper and held it high above his head, eager to see if the mouth of the well was open.

"No, it is not!" he cried in agony, while the great drops of perspiration streamed from every pore.

"Even if I could succeed in climbing the wall it would hardly be possible for me to lift the heavy cover from the inside without support for my feet."

"Oh, I am doomed—doomed—this cursed hole will be my tomb, and I must perish here without a struggle, caught like a rat in a trap!"

"No, no, not without a struggle. I must at least make an attempt to escape!"

In his pocket was a stout-bladed knife which the visitor had not taken.

He drew the knife out, opened the blade and endeavored by forcing it in among the bricks to scale the wall.

The mortar was not particularly hard and the steel made an impression upon it.

Then a brilliant idea came into the mind of the captive.

Why could he not dig out bricks at regular intervals and so make foot-holds by means of which he could scale the wall.

Encouraged by the thought he set to work immediately and began to pick out the mortar.

In his haste though he was not sufficiently careful, and after he had been at work for a

few minutes, crack went the knife-blade, breaking off within an inch of the handle.

For a moment the prisoner was prostrated with despair, and then he remembered that there were two blades to the knife.

He began again, and was more careful in his handling of the tool this time.

But the fragile steel was not equal to the task, and soon the second blade snapped in twain.

A torrent of fearful curses came from the lips of the entrapped scoundrel.

For a few moments he was fairly crazy with agony, and then, recovering himself in a measure, he set to work with the broken blades.

The task was a hopeless one, now that the blades were broken, and it was utterly impossible for him to dislodge the brick upon which he was working.

"Doomed! doomed!" again he cried in wild despair.

Then as if to add to his distress he became conscious that his feet were becoming wet.

"That is strange," he muttered, "for the mud seemed to be more dry than wet."

He lit another match, and to his horror discovered that the mud at the bottom of the well had given place to water; there was at least two inches of water, and as he watched it he saw that it seemed to be rapidly rising.

"Ah, I understand now," he gasped.

"Through some porous passage underground the water of the river finds its way into this place, the tide is rising, and I shall be drowned here, as helpless to save myself as a blind kitten cast into an ocean!"

The match went out, and again the utter darkness added to the horror of the situation.

"I was a fool to attempt to measure strength with this Gypsy Wolf, and an ass that I did not accept his offer; but can I not strike at him now?" gasped the entrapped man in utter despair.

In such moments of peril as this the mind works quickly, and soon an idea which seemed to be feasible suggested itself. He could feel that the water was steadily rising.

By the aid of the taper-light he had examined the wall, and the height to which the water rose, was distinctly visible.

He was short in stature and thick set, only standing about five feet five inches high, and the mark upon the wall showed clearly that the water rose to fully seven feet.

Even by standing on tip-toes he could not hope to keep his head above water.

He was no swimmer, could not float, as he hadn't the least experience in that line, and therefore could not hope to escape death by any such device.

That the water should rise to the height of seven feet puzzled him, for it was clearly the rising tide from the river, which was pouring into the pit, the stream being only some few hundred feet distant.

Then a solution of the mystery flashed upon him.

The bottom of the pit was lower than the bed of the river, but the loose soil through which the water found its way into the place was on a higher level.

The well had penetrated into a sort of a quicksand and the water which remained in the pit after the tide went down was gradually absorbed by the porous earth.

The imprisoned man came to the end of the problem in much less time than we have taken to relate the explanation.

Steadily the water rose.

The calmness of despair had taken possession of the doomed man.

He realized that his time had come; a miracle alone could save him, and he had not led such a life as to have reason to hope that Providence would set aside the laws of nature in his behalf.

All that was left for him was to devise some means by which he could strike a blow at the man who had doomed him to so terrible a death.

"I will write a statement of the whole affair from the beginning to the end," he muttered.

"I have a memorandum book in my pocket and a stylograph pen, so the writing materials are at hand, and as the box is full of matches, by lighting them one after another I shall be able to obtain sufficient light."

The water by this time was up to his knees, and he understood that there was urgent necessity for haste.

He took out his book and pen, emptied the matches from the box into his side-pocket, so as to be able to reach them easily, then with his knife made a hole in the end of the box so as to stick the match in it.

Placing the box in his mouth, he lit the match, stuck it in the box, and thus being able to have the free use of both of his hands, proceeded to write his confession.

As fast as one match burnt out he replaced it with another.

It was slow work, for the wax matches were not large ones, though they lasted for about a minute, and therefore the interruptions were constant.

The task was completed at last, and not a bit too soon, for when he wrote his signature at the end of the statement the last match was half-burnt out.

After the task was completed the writer tore his handkerchief into strips, knotted them together and bound the string thus formed around the memorandum book as tightly as possible.

"The cover is good leather and I don't believe the water will be able to soak into the book far enough to wash out the writing," he said as the match expired, plunging the place in total darkness again.

"This will be a blow from the grave and my prayer is that it may strike this Gypsy Wolf when he least expects it!" he cried with grim determination.

The water by this time was above his waist and it was rising so fast that it was plain it must come from some neighboring pool which, when filled by the tide to a certain height, discharged its water into the pit, and being of far greater size, soon filled up the lesser cavity.

The water washed the chin of the doomed man.

"Oh, Heaven have mercy on my guilty soul," he cried in accents wild.

And now that death was fairly on him and he felt that he was in the clutch of the grim tyrant, he made a desperate struggle for his life.

He essayed to float—he beat the water with his hands, striving to keep his head above the surface.

With the energy born of despair he tried to dig his nails into the merciless walls; but now the rough bricks seemed to his frenzied fancy as smooth as glass, and he was unable to get the least hold.

"Help, help!" he cried, "I am dying—dying here like a dog!"

"Oh, Gypsy Wolf, have mercy upon me—save me and I will be your slave forevermore!"

But the gurgle of the water as his frantic movements disturbed the surface was the only answer to his supplications.

He threw back his head so as to bring his mouth uppermost, for the water was now on a level with that organ.

He was rapidly becoming exhausted, for the hard knocks upon the head which the Gypsy Wolf so plentifully bestowed upon him had materially weakened him, and now his struggles to keep upon the surface of the water were taxing all his powers.

He felt that his brain was reeling! the strain upon it was too much for human nature to stand.

Wild ravings came from his lips.

"I will come back from the grave to haunt your footsteps, you Gypsy murderer! With my phantom hands I will tear at your very heart until the blood gushes forth, ha, ha, ha!"

There was a single wild peal of demoniac laughter, a violent splashing of the water and then all was still.

The spirits of the wave had claimed their victim.

CHAPTER V. THE PICTURE.

SIX months have come and gone since the day when the dark waters of the North river supported the body of the dead girl so wondrous in her beauty.

The annual Artists' Exhibition at the Academy of Design had opened, and among the many excellent paintings none excited more attention than the canvas bearing the signature of Marcus Wintergreen.

It was simply the head of a young girl—a blonde-haired beauty, with great, glorious blue eyes.

"A Study of the Beautiful" the artist had named the painting, and the gossips of the town were much excited over the subject.

"It was plainly a portrait," argued one set, "and who was the lady who chose to masquerade in such a manner?"

"A fancy picture, undoubtedly," declared another coterie; "for no living woman ever possessed such beauty."

When the artist was questioned, the seekers after knowledge gained but little information.

"It is not a fancy sketch," he declared to the ones who held to the theory that the picture was a portrait.

"Aha! I told you so!" the wiseacres exclaimed in triumph.

"Who is the lady, and where is she?" asked the doubters who held to the contrary opinion.

"I do not know; no living woman ever sat to me for the picture."

These "ambiguous givings-out" puzzled the critics, and they really did not know what to make of it.

The reader has probably guessed the truth.

The picture was the portrait of the beautiful dead girl who had been found by the river patrol floating on the murky current of the North river, and whom the artist had stumbled upon by accident in the gloomy precincts of the morgue.

It seemed likely to prove a lucky thing for

Wintergreen, as the picture attracted more attention than any other work that had ever come from his brush, and yet quite a number of his portraits had been highly commended both by the critics and the public.

There was always quite a little throng of people gathered around the picture, for the mystery which was attached to it served to stimulate curiosity.

On one particular evening, when there were more people than usual gathered in front of the "Study of the Beautiful," two young men whose attention had been attracted by the knot of people, began to make their way toward the picture, coming from different directions.

One was a typical New York dude, a slenderly built fellow, with corn-colored hair, elaborately parted in the center, scanty side-whiskers of the same hue, and a face which strongly reminded one of a full moon.

He was dressed in the extreme of fashion, and carried a gorgeous opera-glass mounted in pearl and gold, so as to be prepared for a critical examination of the paintings, and altogether, to use the current slang of the day, he was a "darling of the first water."

This gentleman was a well-known man about town, being a scion of one of the old New York families, and as he was the happy possessor of a princely fortune, few of the gilded youths of the great metropolis were more fortunately situated than Everhard Vinelander, as he was called.

We say gilded youths, but Vinelander was not exactly a youth, being a man of five-and-thirty; but owing to his boyish appearance he did not seem to be a day over twenty-two or three, and, in fact, he was always called young Vinelander.

The gentleman who was approaching from the opposite direction was a decided contrast to the dude.

He was a tall, muscularly-built fellow, with an oval-shaped face, the lower part of which was hidden by a short, crispy beard, black as the raven's wing.

His hair, which curled in little ringlets all over his well-shaped head, was of the same hue, and as his complexion was as swarthy as that of one of Italy's sons, he had a most decidedly foreign look.

He was plainly dressed in a dark business suit, which was really a little the worse for wear, and not a single article of jewelry was visible about his person.

But despite his plain attire there was something about the man which involuntarily commanded attention.

There was a stately dignity in his bearing, not assumed but perfectly natural, that could not but make an impression upon any one with eyes in their head.

The face, too, was a noticeable one, with its finely-cut features, the clear, penetrating eyes, dark-gray in hue, but which had the property of appearing to be jet-black a dozen paces distant.

He was just such a man as a good judge of human nature would have delighted to call friend, and who would have taken a second thought before provoking into an enemy.

Of the two, the dude was the first to perceive the other, and the moment that Vinelander's eyes fell upon the dark countenance of the stranger, a look of delight appeared upon his usually vacant face.

"Upon me word! Strike me silly, now, if this isn't the most unexpected thing, you know!" he murmured to himself the moment he caught sight of the other, and then with outstretched hand he hastened to greet the stranger.

"Old fellow—deah boy, you don't know how delighted I am to see you again!"

For a moment a shade, seemingly of annoyance, appeared upon the face of the stranger, but he took the proffered hand, however.

The two were a little distance from the throng passing up and down in front of the line of paintings and so the meeting between them did not attract any particular attention.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but hav'n't you made a mistake?" asked the stranger, in a low, deep-toned, musical voice.

"A mistake! bless me! what the deuce do you mean, deah boy?" replied Vinelander, astonished at the question.

"Why, you accost me as if you knew me—"

"And I do, of course!" interrupted the other, quickly.

"Oh, no, I think not; I am sure that you have the advantage of me."

"Not at all, not at all!" replied the dude, petulantly. "Upon my word, you know, I never make a mistake in a matter of this kind."

"I know that I am a deuced idiot, generally speaking. Hav'n't brains enough to go in when it rains, and all that sort of thing, but when it comes to remembering faces, there is just where I get my fine work in, you know."

"You may have forgotten me; I don't doubt in the least that you have, but I remember you, although it is over ten years since we met."

"Why, don't you remember the old times at college?" added the dude, a decided tremor perceptible in his voice.

"Surely you can't have forgotten our college days. I was a poor, miserable little wretch

then, a second cousin of the great New York Vinelanders.

"And the head of the family, the patroon, as he delighted to be called, happening to come across me one day, out of charity volunteered to pay for my education, and I must say that if ever money was wasted in this world the cash the old gentleman paid out for me was thrown away."

"I really think if I had kept on studying for a hundred years I wouldn't have known any more at the end of the time than at the beginning, for I forgot just about as quickly as I learned."

"But you, old fel, you stuck by me like a brick—coached me, took my part when the fellows tried to impose on me, and lent me money when I got into a scrape to get me out of it—and the Lord only knows how much I owe you—for I'm blessed if I do!"

There was a softened look in the eyes of the other as he listened to the speech.

"But times have changed with me since those old days," the dude continued.

"Death stepped in and swept away all those that stood between the old patroon and myself, and when the old boy bid the world good-by, I awoke one morning and found myself a dozen times a millionaire."

"A lucky turn of fortune's wheel for you," the other observed.

"Yes, and do you know, deah boy, I've been on the lookout for you ever since it happened. I've a deuced good memory for some things, faces in particular, names I never could recall."

"I knew you the moment I set eyes on you, and yet I couldn't call you by name to save my life."

"I am called Osman Tripoli."

"Osman Tripoli?" the dude murmured, reflectively, and then he shook his head.

"Mr. Tripoli, how do you put it when you want to tell a fellow that you don't believe him, and wish to word the communication so that he won't take offense at the frankness?"

A quiet smile played around the stranger's resolute mouth.

"I'm sure I don't know; if I doubt a man's word, and wish to take any notice of his speech, I tell him outright that he lies," replied the other.

"Yes, yes, that is all very well for a big, broad-shouldered fellow like you, but that game wouldn't work with a little man like me at all."

"I should stand a fine chance of getting 'knocked out' every time I tried it."

"You may be called Osman Tripoli, now; that is all right; this is a free country, and a man has the right to call himself what he pleases, and I don't suppose it is really any one's business, but you were not known by that name when we were at college together."

"Why are you so positive in regard to my identity?" the other asked. "You say that ten years have passed, and in ten years the boy of twenty becomes the man of thirty."

"If I am the person you take me to be, I must have changed greatly in that time."

"Oh, you have, my deah boy, you have! I don't believe that any one would recognize you but myself, but it is as I told you, I have a most astonishing memory for faces; it's the only gift that I am conscious of possessing, and so I suppose it is given to me remarkable strong in order to make up for the lack of others."

"But for you, of all men in this world, I have been on the lookout ever since I came into my property."

"You are about the only man in the world who ever did me a service, with the exception of the old patroon, and now that I am in a position to return it, for you to deny an old-time friendship is deuced hard, and I did not think you would be the man to do such a thing."

The dude's tone visibly affected the stranger, and impulsively he extended his hand.

"Old friend! you are right, I am the man, and right glad am I to meet you."

The two shook hands warmly.

CHAPTER VI.

THE STRANGER'S STORY.

"WELL, old fellow, I'm deuced glad to see you!" Vinelander exclaimed. "I'm as glad to see you as the ordinary man would be to discover a gold mine. But, I say, what is your deuced name, anyhow? I know that it isn't any such an outlandish appellation as Tripoli, but hang me! if I can remember what it is."

"So much the better, I wish it to be forgotten. I have been absent from my native land for nearly ten years and I was in hopes that no one would recognize me. I have changed so greatly that I did not believe that any one would know me."

"My deah boy, I don't really believe that any one would, excepting some man like myself, gifted with wonderful powers in that line. Why, you look decidedly more like a foreigner than an American, and in fact, you are so outlandish in your appearance that you look more like some of those Oriental barbarians, a Persian or a Turk than a European."

"That is not wonderful when it is considered that I have spent nearly ten years amid the Arabs of the Desert, have worn their costume,

lived in their tents, learned to speak their language and became so truly a son of the wilderness that strangers never suspected I was not what I appeared to be."

"By Jove!" the dude exclaimed in admiration, "this is a regular romance, you know. But what on earth induced you to bury yourself from the world after this fashion?"

"I had good cause, rest assured, and if you feel sufficiently interested I will relate my story. Possibly it will do me good to free my mind to you, old friend."

"Upon my word I shall be delighted, so fire away as soon as you like."

There were a couple of chairs in a cozy nook just across the room and the two took possession of them.

"The story you told of your early life in some particulars reminded me of my own. My father was a wealthy man; my mother I never knew, for she died in my infancy. I was an elder son, and the only other member of the family was a brother some two years younger than myself."

"From an early age my father showed a decided partiality for my brother, and even as a child I felt hurt and resented it."

"I was utterly at a loss to understand why such a thing should be. I was as well-favored as he in every respect; in fact everybody but my father seemed to think I was by far the best of the two, and as we grew up I took a decided lead in almost everything."

"I was far in advance in our studies, his master in all rural sports, for nature had gifted me with far greater strength, skill and determination, but still my father favored my brother greatly. He was not harsh or cruel to me, you understand, yet my every wish was not anticipated and gratified in every way as it was in my brother's case."

"It was plain to every one that while my father dearly loved my brother, he only tolerated me."

"And so I grew up, resenting this injustice every hour of my life, but I was too proud to complain of the slight."

"Yes, yes, I can understand that," Vinelander remarked. "You were always so deuced self-reliant that even at college before you attained your majority, you seemed like a man of thirty."

"Strange as it may appear, this treatment did not give rise to any ill-feeling between my brother and myself; on the contrary it seemed to strengthen the love which existed between us."

"He was the younger and the weaker and I was his guide and protector."

"He resented the strange treatment of our common parent as much as I, and, taking advantage of the favor with which he was regarded, sometimes protested against the partiality so openly shown."

"That was something like a brother."

"Yes, but my father always answered that it was not the truth, and asserted that we were treated alike, but that deceived no one."

"When the time for college came, he was sent to the most famous and expensive one in the country, while I was assigned to that second-rate one where I met you."

"Our college days ended, we returned home, and in a week after our arrival our father was stricken with a mortal illness and died suddenly one night with not a soul near to close his eyes."

"He had made a will, and to my brother bequeathed all his property, with the exception of a gift of a thousand dollars to me, and a yearly annuity of two thousand more."

"Well, that wasn't so bad," the dude remarked.

"Oh, no; it made me independent. My brother, in the most generous manner possible, offered to share the fortune with me, for he was anxious to make amends for the injustice of our sire."

"That showed he was a jolly good fellow," Vinelander commented.

"Yes, but I would not agree to it. The sum bequeathed to me was ample for my support, and, in fact, with my simple habits, I could easily have lived on half the amount."

"After the estate was settled, from the old lawyer, who had been the life-long friend and confidant of my father, I ascertained the reason of my sire's peculiar partiality for my brother and why he was so cold to me."

"Upon my word this is a regular romance!" the dude hastened to declare as the other paused for a moment.

"Truth is stranger than fiction, you know, so the old adage says, and in this case it certainly was true."

"The old lawyer told me that he had an important secret to reveal which would explain my father's peculiar behavior, but first requested me to give him my word that I would not make the matter public, as no good purpose would be served by my so doing."

"Willingly I gave the promise, and then he related a story that astounded me."

"My father had been twice married; I was the son of the first wife, my brother the child of the second."

"The first marriage was a secret one, my mother being a poor girl who fascinated my

father by her beauty, and she, dazzled by the thought of obtaining a rich husband and so being freed from the life of toil which was slowly but surely wearing her into the grave, consented to wed him without really being in love."

"That isn't anything odd; a deuced lot of girls do that sort of thing every day, you know," Vinelander observed.

"My father did not realize that such a thing could be. He was desperately in love with his beautiful young wife and madly jealous of her, but, as often happens when the flame of love burns too fiercely, it was not a lasting one."

"That's very true indeed. I've known of a dozen such cases."

"My mother was an innocent, truthful girl and she was unwise enough to allow her husband to ascertain that she was not wildly in love with him, although she was doing all in her power to make him happy."

"My father was both jealous and unreasonable, and he took the crazy notion into his head that if my mother did not love him, it was because she loved some one else, and acting on this insane impulse he made her life so miserable that at last she fled from him, making her flight just a month before my birth."

"My father yielded to the insane belief that the woman whose life he had made miserable had fled with a more favored lover and so gave hot pursuit."

"Really this is deuced interesting!" Vinelander exclaimed.

"The pursuit was successful, he discovered my mother in the poor abode where she had sought refuge, but she had yielded up her life in giving me birth."

"In his mad rage, for my father was a man of violent temper when roused, he would have disowned me, but for the influence of the lawyer, who aided him in his search."

"Six months after my birth he married again, and the issue of the second marriage was my brother, but it really seemed as if fate was anxious to punish him for his unjust treatment of his first wife, for the second one only survived the birth of her child a few days."

"My father never married again and we two boys were reared in utter ignorance of the fact that we were the children of two different mothers, but toward me my sire never felt as he did toward my half-brother, who as he grew to manhood was the image of my father, while I, olive-skinned and with a foreign look, resembled my mother."

"Thus was the mystery explained."

"After the death of our parent I made my home with my brother, for he would not hear of my going elsewhere, and as a fickle goddess Fortune ordained, both of us fell in love with the same young lady."

"My brother, who evidently had been born with a golden spoon in his mouth, was the favored one."

"I did not bear him any ill-will, for we were too truly brothers to allow anything to come between us, but the blow was so severe a one that I felt it was impossible for me to remain at home and so I sought to find the lethe of forgetfulness in a foreign land."

"I went abroad, chance drew my footsteps to the land of the Orient and in the wilds of the Arabian deserts, shut off from all communication with the civilized world, I found the forgetfulness which I sought."

"No doubt; By Jove! I should think a life among those savages would be apt to unsettle any man's remembrances."

"Yes, I lived with the Arabs so long that I was regarded as one of the tribe, but as years passed on a longing took possession of me to again look upon my home, but it was my idea to come as a stranger, without allowing any one to suspect my identity, but since your eyes have penetrated my disguise I am not so sure that I can carry out my plan."

"Oh, I don't believe that any one but myself would have recognized you; as I have told you I have a peculiar gift in that line; but your name now I can't recall if it were to save my life."

"Osman Tripoli is good enough for the present; let that content you," the other replied with a smile.

"But now that you have my story, let us take a look at the paintings."

The two arose and as chance willed, made their way, attracted by the crowd, to Wintergreen's masterpiece.

No sooner had the eyes of Tripoli, as we shall call him, fallen upon the picture than he gave a start of surprise and grasped his companion's arm.

"Great heavens! can it be possible?" he exclaimed.

"What is the matter, deah boy?" the dude asked.

"That picture! It is the portrait of the woman I loved and lost!"

CHAPTER VII.

AN AWFUL SUSPICION.

"Is it possible?" exclaimed Vinelander, adjusting his opera glass, and taking a good look at the exquisite face. "She is a beauty."

"Yes, the original of the portrait was as beautiful a girl as the eyes of man ever looked upon, and the painting does not flatter her in the least."

"But I do not understand it. It is evidently her portrait and yet it is catalogued as though it was a fancy sketch."

"There's been a deal of curiosity excited about it," the dude explained, who was generally well posted in the gossip of the town, and then he related to his friend the speculations which the painting had excited, and the ambiguous givings-out of the artist.

"I should like to see Mr. Wintergreen, and put the question to him outright, if it is not the picture of the sweet girl who has been the only love of my life."

"Nothing easier, deah boy!" Vinelander exclaimed, immediately.

"He is a member of my club, and as a general thing, can be found there at about this hour, so if you would like to take a stroll in that direction, I will introduce you, and you can put him through a cross-examination."

Tripoli gladly accepted the invitation, and five minutes later the two were in the street and on the way to the club-house, which was only some fifteen minutes' walk.

As Vinelander had expected, the artist was in the reading-room, and "Mr. Osman Tripoli" was at once introduced to him.

"An old college chum of mine," the dude explained, "although you wouldn't think so to look at him, for he more strongly resembles an Algerine pirate or an Arab son-of-a-gun, than a peaceable American citizen."

The artist expressed his pleasure at meeting "any friend of Mr. Vinelander," and this was not mere courtesy alone, for the dude had been one of the first patrons of the rising artist, and had more than any other man, materially aided him.

Tripoli immediately proceeded to the attack, for he was burning with impatience to learn the history of the picture.

"We have just come from the Academy of Design," he began, "and I must congratulate you on your exquisite work of art."

"The lady's portrait, I refer to; the one catalogued under the title of 'A Study of the Beautiful,' and I was the more interested in it, for—apart from its merits as a work of art—I think I know the lady, the original of the painting."

Wintergreen plainly showed his surprise.

"You really astonish me!" he exclaimed, "for if you do, possibly you will be able to unravel one of those dark mysteries which seem a part and parcel of all great cities."

"A mystery?" the stranger asked.

"Good gracious!" the dude added, all attention.

"Yes; listen to my story, and then see if the tale is not a strange one."

And then the artist related how he had chanced to see the unknown dead girl in the morgue, and being impressed by her beauty had determined to reproduce her face, only instead of using her as a model for a Madonna he had painted a fancy picture instead.

A dark cloud came over the face of the stranger as he listened to the narrative of the artist.

"It does not seem possible that by any strange freak of fortune this unfortunate creature, picked out of the river and then buried like a pauper, can be the woman who only a few years ago I left in the full enjoyment of life and happiness, for she was happy, basking in the smiles of fortune, with everything surrounding her that the heart of a woman could desire."

"It does not seem likely," the artist observed, "and yet such things are happening all the time."

"This life is full of ups and downs, particularly in the United States. The beggar of to-day may by a lucky stroke become the millionaire of to-morrow, and many a man whose check was good for a million at ten o'clock in the morning has wandered around the city at six in the evening, wondering where he would be able to procure money enough to pay for his supper and lodging."

"It cannot be," Tripoli exclaimed, decidedly.

"No change of fortune could have possibly brought that beautiful girl—the idol of all happy enough to enjoy her acquaintance—to a suicide's death and a pauper's grave. But I will probe the matter to the very bottom. No doubt I shall find upon investigation that it is only one of those strange resemblances which sometimes occur."

"That explanation is reasonable enough," Wintergreen admitted.

"But I fear," he continued, "that you will have great difficulty in discovering anything more about the matter than what I have told you."

"At the time of the occurrence I became interested enough about it to endeavor to discover all I could in regard to the affair, but my investigation was fruitless of results."

"If you like, I will gladly accompany you, and as I have been over the road once, I've no doubt I can materially aid you in picking up the few clues that are to be found."

Tripoli thanked the artist for his offer, and

said he would be pleased to have his aid and advice.

"And, deah boys!" exclaimed the dude, "if you haven't any objection, I would like to make one of the party. I have become deucedly interested, don't you know, and if you want any money you can draw on me for all you want."

"Money makes the mare go, you know, and sometimes the more money you put into a thing of this kind the better the machine works."

Tripoli expressed his gratification at the offer and said he would be glad to have the pleasure of Vinelander's company.

The artist suggested that they might proceed on the investigation immediately.

"I think, gentlemen," he said in conclusion, "you can find out all there is to be learned about this business in a couple of hours this evening."

"A newspaper file in which we can find an account of the discovery of the body in the river and the second article which described how the body of the girl, not being claimed, was buried in the Potter's Field, will give us about all the information that any one knows about the matter."

"Then we can call on the keeper of the morgue and extract from him all he knows, but unless he has learned something new since the time when I saw him, he will only be able to repeat the newspaper reports."

This advice was acted upon immediately.

Calling a cab the three young men were driven down-town to one of the leading newspaper offices, where the request to be allowed to examine the newspaper files was readily granted.

Guided by Wintergreen, whose retentive memory had retained the date of the sad occurrence, it was an easy matter to find the paragraphs which described the mysterious affair.

With a gloomy brow Tripoli perused the brief items, and he saw that the artist was correct in his statement that there wasn't anything which afforded a clew to the girl's identity.

From the newspaper office the party were driven to the morgue, and they were fortunate enough to find the head keeper in person; but to the astonishment of the three he had forgotten all about the affair, and was rather inclined to be offended at the supposition that after the lapse of a year's time he could be expected to remember the particulars of any one case.

"A five-dollar bill slipped quietly into his hand by the cunning dude, though, caused a decided change in his manner and he immediately expressed a wild desire to do all in his power to aid the visitors in their search."

A look over the records seemed to freshen his memory.

He recalled the circumstance, or at least he said he did, whether the statement was true or not, but he was not able to give the seekers-after-knowledge any more information than they already possessed.

Baffled, but not discouraged, Tripoli withdrew with his companions.

"I will seek information at the home of the girl," he answered as they rode up-town again.

"It is a good idea," Wintergreen remarked, and Vinelander made a similar observation.

The plan of action that the stranger decided upon was simple enough.

He would go directly to the little county town where the girl had formerly resided.

"If she is alive and well I will satisfy myself with a look at her beautiful face, now seemingly as dear to me as it ever was, and then turn my footsteps to the Old World again, seeking for novel adventures to dull the pain of remembrance," he murmured to himself as the cab proceeded on its way.

"But if I find that this unknown girl was the woman whom I loved so dearly, then I will make it my business to ascertain by what strange train of circumstances she came to such a dreadful death, and if there has been mischief afoot, I will do my best to hunt down and give to justice the authors of it."

He did not confide any of the particulars of his plan to his companions, merely saying he would visit the section of country where she formerly resided and see if aught had happened to her.

"Pray let me know how your researches turn out," the artist said, and the dude also made the same request.

Tripoli readily promised that he would not fail to post them, and at the club the two friends bade the artist good-night.

Vinelander would not hear of his old college chum going to a hotel while he had apartments in town.

The dude kept "bachelor's hall" in fine style, after the English manner, in one of the fashionable apartment-houses up-town, and to his lair he carried his old friend.

Before they sought their couches that night Tripoli had planned his campaign.

CHAPTER VII.

ON THE TRACK.

THE early morning train on the Hudson river railroad carried the dusky-faced stranger northward, but he rode only a few miles, get-

ting off at a small station known as Hastings-on-Hudson.

Lounging on the platform was one of those country idlers, whose only business seems to be in haunting the neighborhood of the depot, for one or more of them is always on hand to greet the coming of every train.

This was an elderly man, and the stranger recognized him in an instant.

Often as a boy had he been indebted to the old fellow for apples from his orchard.

Uncle Bill Snyder he was generally termed, and bore the reputation of being one of the jolliest men alive.

Confident that time and the sun of the Orient had changed him so that he could not be recognized, Tripoli accosted him.

"Sir, can you tell me where Raven Towers is situated?" he asked.

"Raven Towers, hey?" the old man replied, surveying the questioner from head to foot, anxious apparently to ascertain if he had ever seen him before, and determined if he was a stranger to take such a good look at him as to be certain to know him again.

"Yes, sir, Raven Towers."

"Oh, yes, I know whar that is," and then the old fellow surveyed Tripoli again in the most careful manner. "You go straight ahead."

The young man surmised from the expression upon the old fellow's face that he had a suspicion that his questioner was no stranger to him, but bore the scrutiny without flinching, satisfied that if the old man did not recognize him there wasn't much danger of anybody else discovering who he was.

"Yes, sir," continued the old fellow, "I know it like a book and I know everybody that has lived in it for the last fifty years too, and a dreadful onlucky house it has been."

"I tell you wot it is, neighbor, I wouldn't undertake for to live into that house for a spell of years for a fortin', and I'm a-talkin' right out in meetin', now you bet!"

"Is it possible?" Tripoli asked, assuming an air of deep interest—we say assuming, for the evil reputation of Raven Towers was well known to him, although, like all the enlightened people of the neighborhood, he did not place any credence in the wild tales which affected the fair fame of the ancient mansion.

"Oh, yes, some folks don't take no stock in the yarns, but I do, every time, and I've got mighty good reasons for doing so, too!" But, I say, neighbor!" exclaimed the old man, abruptly. "It 'pears to me as if I had seen you some-whar afore, but I wish I may die if I know whar it was. Wot's your name, anyhow?"

"Tripoli—Osman Tripoli."

"Tripoli—Tripoli, ho, ho, ho!" laughed the other, "wa-al, if that ain't 'bout the durnest kind of a name that I've ran into in a hull year of Sundays, meaning no offense to you, you know."

"Not at all, sir," the stranger replied, politely.

"It is rather a strange name, but as it is the best I have, I am forced to be contented with it."

"Wa-al, if that's your name I reckon I don't know you then, though I was mighty sart'in that your figurehead wasn't new to me, but you're arter Raven Towers, you say?"

"Yes, sir, I have a little business there."

"May I make bold to ax who it is you want to see?" the old fellow asked with all the inquisitive curiosity common to the average countryman.

"The master of the mansion."

"The master—du tell!" exclaimed Uncle Bill, a peculiar expression appearing on his features.

Tripoli, a really wonderful reader of the human face divine, immediately came to the conclusion that all was not well with the master of Raven Towers, and a gloomy apprehension seized upon him.

"Will I be apt to find the gentleman at home?" he asked.

"Waal, thar's a man thar, but he ain't exactly the master of the Towers, according to the way I look at it, though I must own he kinder carries sail as if he owned the hull place."

"The one I wish to see *does* own it, unless some stroke of misfortune has befallen him recently."

"Is his name Weathercroft? Obadiah Weathercroft?"

Tripoli shook his head.

"No, I do not know that gentleman."

"Sakes alive! You don't mean to say that you have come to see Ashburnham?" demanded the old man, evidently a little excited.

"Yes, that is the name," Tripoli responded, evil forebodings tugging at his heart-strings.

"Why, don't you know?—whar have you been? How long is it since you knew the party?"

"Well, it is some time since I have seen him, as I have been abroad, and my business has so occupied my thoughts that I have not been able to pay much attention to old acquaintances; but finding myself in this neighborhood, I thought I would call upon Mr. Ashburnham."

"You're too late, sir—too late by a year, or more!" and the old man shook his head in a melancholy way.

Tripoli guessed what was coming from this melancholy preamble, and braced himself to meet the shock, which was the more severe from being totally unexpected.

"I judge from your words that some calamity has happened to my old acquaintance," he said.

"You're right enough thar, sir; but it is wot we've all got to come to, sooner or later; but it did seem strange that a hale, hearty young fellow like Reginald Ashburnham should be taken, while thar were plenty of worthless old hulks like myself a-jest a-hangin' on to the verge of life by the eyelids, as you might say."

"Reginald Ashburnham, then, is dead," the other remarked, his dark face darker than ever.

"Yes, died jest about eighteen months ago."

"And his wife—what became of her?"

"Waal, neighbor, thar 'ere is a mystery, and I reckon thar isn't anybody 'round these parts wot kin give you any information 'bout her."

"You astonish me," Tripoli observed, speaking for the sake of drawing the old fellow on, for in his own mind there was hardly a doubt now that the hapless girl whose body had been found in the North river was the woman he had once loved so well.

"Yes, sir, it was one of the queerest cases that ever happened in these parts," the old man remarked, with a reflective air.

"Mr. and Mrs. Ashburnham were jest as nice a couple as I ever laid eyes on. He was a perfect gentleman, and she was a lady, every inch of her!"

"There was plenty of money to make the mare go, and only one thing, as far as I could see, to bother 'em; and that was, they didn't have any children, and of course when a man is lucky enough to be worth a million or two of dollars, it is only natural for him to want heirs; but for all that, the fact never seemed to make trouble to either Ashburnham or his wife, for a more lovable couple nobody ever saw, but old Death stepped in at last and the master of Raven Towers kicked the bucket."

"He died mighty sudden, too; was only sick for 'bout a week, and nobody reckoned that it was going to be anything dangerous, but all of a sudden he went off like a flash!"

"He had ample medical advice, I presume?"

"Waal, no, he didn't," the old fellow replied, slowly. "You see, the fact is, nobody thought that thar was any particular danger."

"The old family doctor was away from home; went to California on a pleasure trip, and a new man was called in, and I reckon he didn't know any more than the law allows."

"Anyhow, he sed that thar wasn't any danger, and Ashburnham wasn't skeered, 'cos he was so strong and healthy, but in three days he was a dead man."

"Caught cold, the doctor sed, a touch of malarial, you know, and he died of blood-poisoning."

"In some cases of that nature death does come quick, and almost without warning," Tripoli observed.

"Waal, as I sed, he went like a flash—jest like the blowing out of a candle."

"How did the wife bear the shock?"

"Pretty nigh driv her crazy. Oh, I tell you! she took on dreadfully, and at one time I reckoned that she'd foller her husband, but she was young and tough, and pulled through."

"She inherited the entire estate, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes; Ashburnham had made a will, leaving half the property to his wife and half to his brother."

"His brother?" the stranger asked, in a tone of question.

"Yes, his brother, Stephen. You see the will was an old one, made by Ashburnham just arter his marriage. Stephen was alive then—dead now—been dead eight or nine years."

"It was an old will, but Ashburnham had never made a new one or destroyed the old one."

"Didn't make any particular difference, though, for Stephen, being unmarried, his brother's wife was his heir, and she came into the property."

"I see."

"And now comes the queerest thing 'bout the hull business," and the voice of the old man became extremely solemn at this point.

"Jest about six months arter the death of Reginald Ashburnham his widow suddenly disappeared."

"Disappeared!" exclaimed the listener, deeply interested in the narrative.

"Yes, she went to bed one evening just the same as usual, and when the morning came she wasn't to be found."

"The bed didn't show any signs that anybody had slept in it, and so it looked as if she had waited until everybody in the house was asleep and then had sneaked out."

"But what reason was there for such a thing?"

"None at all as far as anybody knows and that's whar the mystery comes in."

"But is it possible that no steps were taken to discover what had become of the lady, or to ascertain why she had left her home?"

"Oh, yes," the old man responded. "Neither money nor trouble were spared. Detectives were

hired and they did their level best for nearly a month."

"And gained no clew?"

"Oh yes, some on 'em said they did, but us folks 'round here who had known Mrs. Ashburnham for years, didn't take no stock in their yarns."

"People generally believed the lies of course, for most folks are ready to believe anything bad, but I wouldn't have it, and thar war a good many more wot sided with me."

"What was the conclusion at which the detectives arrived?" asked Tripoli, anxious to get at the heart of the mystery.

CHAPTER IX.

MORE MYSTERY.

"WHY the darned fools tried to make out that Mrs. Ashburnham had run away with a fellow named Clement Bridges, the gardener of Raven Towers," said the old man.

"That was a strange conclusion for them to reach!" Tripoli exclaimed, completely astonished at the intelligence.

"It was a darned lie from beginning to end!" Uncle Bill exclaimed, hotly.

"Mrs. Ashburnham wasn't any sich woman, and then too if she had wanted a feller I reckon she had too much sense to take up with a chap like this gardener cuss."

"He was an Englishman, you see, a regular Johnny Bull; and though he didn't cut up any didoes 'round here, yet I know jest as well as can be that he wasn't no account."

"Was he a good-looking man, one calculated to attract a woman of Mrs. Ashburnham's stamp?"

"Good-lookin'!" and the old man's lips curled in contempt, "waal now, you kin jest bet that he wasn't!"

"He was as ugly as a hedge fence, an ungainly, bow-legged sort of a brute. Why, thar wasn't a servant gal in the place that wouldn't have turned up her nose at him, and that's the kind of a man he was, and the idee of a lady like Mrs. Ashburnham, young, pretty as a picture, with plenty of money, able to take her pick out of a thousand gen'lmen, running away with this darned loafer, who used for to git full up to the neck two or three times a week, or in fact wherever he had a good chance to get at the rum shops, is jest too ridiculous for anything."

"But why did the detectives believe that the lady had eloped with this ruffian?"

"Because he happened to clear out that same night without saying anything to anybody about going to leave, and thar was pretty nigh to a month's wages due him too."

"He disappeared on the same night?" asked Tripoli, thoughtfully.

"Yes, in the morning he was among the missing. Of course everybody thought it was pretty funny, but thar wasn't any one 'round here mean enough to suggest that the two had run away together until these darned detectives got their fingers in the pie."

"Did they discover anything to warrant the suspicion beyond the mere fact of the simultaneous disappearance of the two?"

"Yes, some on 'em made out that they did, but I never took any stock in their yarns."

"What did they discover?"

"Waal, they sed that they had found out that on the night the two disappeared, a man and woman answering exactly to the description of Mrs. Ashburnham and the gardener boarded a late train at the station bound for New York."

"They didn't have any tickets but paid their fare to the conductor, and when the pictures of Mrs. Ashburnham and Bridges were shown to him, he was positive that the man was the same, and thought the woman was too, but he couldn't be certain about her, for she had a veil drawn over her face, and acted as if she didn't want people to look at her very closely."

"It was her queer way of acting that attracted the conductor's attention and made him look more carefully at the two than he would otherwise have done."

"Yes, I can readily understand that," the other remarked.

"And did they discover anything more?"

"Not a thing. The two got off the train at New York and the detectives wasn't able to find out anything about them."

"How long ago did this happen?"

"'Bout a year."

A chill struck the heart of the investigator. The date agreed with the one upon which the body of the girl was found in the river.

"And from that day to this," the old man continued, "no one has ever heard a word of either Mrs. Ashburnham or the gardener, although there was a heap of money spent in advertising for 'em."

"It certainly is a very mysterious affair," Tripoli remarked.

"As far as I can see from what you have told me, there wasn't the slightest need of Mrs. Ashburnham cloping with the gardener. I am assuming, of course, that the detectives' surmises are correct in regard to the affair."

"Of course not!" Uncle Bill asserted. "If she had fallen in love with the rascal and wanted to marry him, thar wasn't nothing to hinder her from a-doing it."

"The property was all hers, and nobody had the right to lift a finger ag'in' it."

"And even if, in a foolish freak, she had run off with the man, it is not likely that she would have abandoned such a princely fortune as had descended to her by her husband's death," Tripoli observed.

"And if she was so reckless of the future as to be indifferent to the money, most certainly such a man as you describe this gardener to be would never have rested until he got his fingers upon some of it."

"That's jest w'ot I've allers said!" the old man declared.

"Bridges was a reg'lar old soaker, too, though he allers had sense enough to 'tend to his work, and never took his cargo on board until he had got through for the day."

"The detectives were evidently on a wrong scent. The woman who went to New York with Bridges could not have been Mrs. Ashburnham, unless, indeed, for some dark purpose she was decoyed to the city by the gardener."

"Then it is strange, too, that he could not be found, and that fact gives rise to the suspicion that he had something to do with his mistress's disappearance."

"If he had murdered her, then he would have an object in keeping out of the way—afraid, of course, that the crime would be detected."

"Sart'in, sart'in; sure as shooting!" Uncle Bill remarked.

"It's certainly a very strange affair, and I do not wonder that the detectives were puzzled."

"It all comes from living in the cussed old house," the other asserted, positively. "I tell you w'ot it is, neighbor, thar's no one has any luck at Raven Towers. Mebbe you ain't acquainted with the house."

Tripoli nodded; it might mean either yes or no, but the old man imagined that it was the latter.

"You see, the 'tarnal old stone-pile is more'n a hundred years old, and it has allers had a bad name, and everybody that has ever taken hold on to it has arter a while been mighty glad for to give it up."

"These Ashburnhams have held on longer than any folks that I know of in my time, but they ain't had any luck in the house."

"So it seems," Tripoli remarked.

"Oh, it is so! and there ain't no two ways 'bout it, either. Old Ashburnham, when he bought the place, spent a small fortune in putting it in order; everybody sed he might jest as well have bought a new house, and I reckon that was pesky nigh the truth."

"Waal, in jest about three years he died, and died sudden, too, and he was a man who looked as if he had the strongest kind of a hold on life."

"He wasn't as old a man as I am, and ought to have outlasted me, and I reckon he would, too, if he hadn't got into Raven Towers."

"You see, sir, the old house allers had the reputation of being haunted."

"Is it possible?"

"Sure as you're born! and it ain't any new story, either, but dates 'way back. The story goes that the feller w'ot built it was an Englishman, who was forced to cut and run from the old country, on account of getting into some awful scrapes—murdered a lot of people, or something of that sort—and war aliers afraid the officers would foller arter him."

"I remember hearing my grandfather tell, when I war a little chap, how this old scoundrel had a lot of secret passages, and vaults, and sich things, in and under the house, so he could hide away in case anybody came after him."

"But I guess that was a yarn, for the house has been overhauled and fixed up three or four times within the last twenty years, and nobody never found any sich places, though some of us chaps w'ot knew the old stories, hunted 'round mighty sharp to diskiver 'em."

"Such legends are common to all old houses, particularly those gloomy stone mansions, built after the fashion of the ancient castles; but who has possession of the house now?"

"Miss Molander; she's a sister to Mrs. Ashburnham, her only living relative, I heerd say, and, of course, her heir, but the thing hain't been settled up yet, 'cos it ain't a sure thing that Mrs. Ashburnham is dead; her body has never been found, you know, and Miss Constance—that's the young lady's name—is sure that her sister is alive, and will come back some time."

"She's an obstinate critter 'bout this thing, and you can't beat it into her head that her sister is dead, and will never return."

"She's only eighteen, and though I believe she is 'bout ten years younger than Mrs. Ashburnham, yet she looks enuff like her fer to be her twin."

"Quite young to have the responsibility of so great an estate resting on her shoulders."

"Oh, the estate is in good hands. Mr. Ashburnham's business manager has charge of everything, and he's a sharp fellow, though an awful quiet kind of a chap."

"I don't think that I have ever had the pleasure of meeting him," Tripoli remarked. "What is his name?"

"Obadiah Weathercroft, cute chap. I tell you! Rather hard at a bargain, but that's business, you know."

"He came here about three years ago and proved to be such a good man that at last Mr. Ashburnham put him in charge of everything, and when he died, everybody said what a good thing it was for the widow that she had such an excellent business man to see to things, and just before her disappearance she gave Obey, as we all call him 'round here, a power of attorney to look after her affairs, so everything, even after her disappearance, went on jest as smooth as clockwork."

"The giving of the power of attorney seems to look as if she meditated going away," Tripoli remarked, thoughtfully.

"Yes, that is jest what the folks 'round here thought, but Obey said she never said a word about sich a thing."

"He had gone with her to York to attend to some business and all of a sudden she said she thought she had better give him authority so he could transact business without having to come to her about it."

"He remarked that there wasn't any particular need of going to the trouble, but as she seemed to desire it the paper was fixed, and I tell you it came in mighty handy after Mrs. Ashburnham disappeared."

"Yes, I presume so," and there was a peculiar look in the speaker's eyes as he uttered the words.

"I'm much obliged for your information. I think Mr. Weathercroft will be able to attend to my business and I will seek him."

And then the two parted, Tripoli taking the road which led to Raven Towers while Uncle Billy strolled in the direction of his favorite haunt, the village grocery-store.

CHAPTER X. RAVEN TOWERS.

It was a good mile from the depot to the stately mansion known as Raven Towers and which as we have seen bore such an ill-omened reputation, so the dusky-faced stranger had plenty of time for reflection as he went on his way.

"It is as deep and dark a mystery as I ever encountered," he mused, aloud, as he strode along with steady steps.

Like many men who have led solitary lives, and who possess few friends, he had fallen into the habit of talking aloud when alone and busied in studying out any perplexing matter.

"A deep and dark mystery," he repeated. "One which has baffled the shrewd, keen-eyed detectives whose business it is to solve such puzzles."

"They are popularly supposed by the world at large to possess a sort of instinct in such matters, something akin to the unerring scent of the bloodhound which leads him straight on the track of the fleeing fugitive, no matter how much the hunted man may double and turn in his desperate endeavor to escape from the unrelenting enemy following so closely upon his heels."

"But is the popular belief true?"

"Is the human detective gifted with any such power?"

"I doubt it. True, age and the experience which comes from long practice may aid them in a great measure when they set out to solve such a mystery as this one, but as to there being any subtle instinct about it—something which will lead them into the right path and warn them when they are hot on a false trail, I do not for an instant believe."

"The records show that the theories formed by these acute man-hunters are as often wrong as right."

"In this case I am satisfied that the detectives were on the wrong scent from the very beginning, and I think—notwithstanding that all I have to go upon is the brief story of the old man—I have a clew which if carefully followed up, will lead me to the heart of the mystery."

"Now to arrange the plan of operations."

"I am about to become a detective and try my wits where more experienced men have failed, and the first point in this difficult game is for me not only to gain admittance to the mansion, but find some pretext to become an inmate there."

"That will in all probability be a hard task to accomplish, but in some way it must be arranged."

"Let me see; I come as a dusky-faced gentleman from across the seas, an English-Arab who once had it in his power to do Mr. Reginald Ashburnham an important service when he was traveling in Egypt, and in return was pressed by him to make his house my home if I ever came to this country."

"The tale is a good one and ought to pass current, and why should any one suspect that it is counterfeit?"

"I come, a stranger, expecting to see Reginald Ashburnham alive and glad to press once again the hand of his old-time friend."

"My amazement at his death will be great, my grief sincere, and my disappointment openly expressed, for I have come with the idea of passing a month or two with him."

"If Constance Molander at all resembles her sister, she will insist upon my tarrying as her guest for a while, and so I will secure the opportunity I desire."

"I wonder what Constance is like?" he mur-

mured, reflectively, his mind returning to the old days when in the first flush of manhood he faced the world with a confident heart, secure in the belief that this life held no prize too loftily placed for him to win.

"When I last saw her she was a child seven or eight years old, a sunny-haired, lovable, little thing, bearing a great resemblance to her sister, Winifred, who became Mrs. Reginald Ashburnham."

"Ah!" and a deep, long-drawn sigh came from the lips of this strong, stern man.

"There isn't the least doubt in my mind now in regard to the fate of Winifred Molander, Mrs. Reginald Ashburnham."

"It was her body that was plucked by the river police from the dark waters and afterward buried in an unmarked grave in the Potter's Field; a waif lost to home and friends."

"But how was it that the shrewd detectives who were in search of the missing woman and who of course were furnished with the photographs and full description of the absent one, did not recognize the unknown body reposing in the dead-house?"

"It is strange and I cannot account for it."

"Then too, by what means did the unfortunate woman come to her death?"

"All the evidence seems to point to a suicide and there wasn't anything about the body to indicate that there had been foul play in the matter."

"Why should she commit suicide? There wasn't any motive, as far as I can see, to drive her to such a terrible step."

"Was it an accident then? Did she wander in the night to the river and in the darkness fall into the water?"

"Supposing that to be the case, death ought not to have ensued, for she was an expert swimmer and could easily have gained the land again."

"No, no, I feel satisfied that she came to her death through some foul play. Some one had a reason for wishing her out of the way and the first thing for me to do after I obtain a footing in the house is to discover who would profit most by her death."

Hardly had the words left his lips, when he came to a sudden halt, aghast at an idea which had rapidly flashed into his mind; an idea so monstrous in its conception that for the moment he was like a man dazed by a thunderbolt.

Constance Molander, Mrs. Ashburnham's young and lovely sister, and her sole heir, was the only person who could largely profit by her death as far as could be seen at present.

"No, no, it is impossible," Tripoli muttered as he again proceeded onward.

"The idea is too monstrous to be credited for a moment. There must be some one in the background."

"That young, gently and tenderly nurtured girl is not capable of committing such a crime, which only a human fiend could conceive and execute," but whoever it is I swear to hunt down and bring to justice and I will not pause in my efforts until the task is accomplished."

And the firm resolution that sat upon his features testified plainly that he would do his best to keep his vow.

By this time Raven Towers was in sight, and the avenger surveyed the place with eager curiosity, anxious to see the changes that time had wrought.

The mansion was a stately building, constructed of gray stone, and in outward appearance strongly resembled the ancient castles of feudal times.

Five massive round towers rose from the building, pointing their turrets to the sky, one in the center and one at each corner.

And from these towers the estate took its name, the original owner—the renegade Englishman who had fled from the mother country, to escape the vengeance of an outraged law, called himself Raven upon arriving in the New World.

It was a false appellation of course, and adopted to conceal his identity.

The estate that surrounded Raven Towers was park-like in extent, and as the stranger gazed upon it, he saw that everything looked about the same as when he had last surveyed the premises.

Ten years had not materially changed Raven Towers.

The trees and shrubs had grown of course, and here and there minor changes had been made, but in all essential particulars the place was the same.

Up the broad walk leading from the street to the mansion went the stranger, passing under the branches of the massive English elms which lined the walk on both sides.

Great, overgrown giants of trees, a good hundred years old.

There was no need to ring the bell, for the front door was open, and a servant sat by it in one of the great hall chairs; his great, horny hands were clasped around one of his knees, and he was staring out into vacancy in an extremely peculiar manner.

The man was an odd-looking fellow—an Irishman, evidently, as was plainly perceptible from his face, with its massive jaw-bone, the small, deep-set eyes, the enormous overhanging eye-

brows, and the low, retreating forehead fringed by a scanty growth of sandy hair.

He was small in stature and so thick-set, as to appear almost deformed, and from the strange, vacant expression upon his features, it appeared to the average observer as if he did not have good sense.

"Is this Raven Towers, the residence of Mr. Reginald Ashburnham?" the stranger asked, as he ascended the steps.

"Shure an' it is," replied the other, speaking with a strong brogue.

"Can I see the gentleman?"

"You can't."

"Why not?"

"He's dead, God rest his soul."

"Take my card, then, to whoever is in charge of the house," Tripoli said, producing his card-case.

CHAPTER XI.

PADDY THE GOSSOON.

THE strange, peculiar eyes of the Irishman—light blue in color, and with the pupils always dilated, like the eyes of a wild beast intent on prey—surveyed the stranger searchingly, then he shook his head as though puzzled and stared at the card.

"Is it to take this in, I am?" he asked, slowly, and as if with the intention of gaining time, though why he wished to delay was a mystery.

"Yes."

"Who to?" and again he examined the applicant for admission from head to foot.

"To whoever is in charge of the house—your master."

"Sorra a master is there here, at all, at all."

"Your mistress, then."

"Yis, and do yees be afther wanting to see her?"

"Yes," the other responded, pleasantly, perceiving that he had an odd fish to deal with, and, seemingly, willing to humor his whims.

"An' is this yer name?" the Irishman asked, examining the card with minute attention.

"It is."

"I'll take me oath dat I niver saw dat name afore," the son of Hibernia muttered, under his breath, yet loud enough to enable the other to hear what he said.

"I've not the least doubt of that, my man, as I am a stranger to this country; but take my name in to your mistress, you hardly need the card, the name will do as well."

"How would she be afther knowing phat your name is widout der card?"

"Why, you can tell it to her."

"An' how will I know it?"

"Can't you read?"

"Sorra a bit!"

The stranger did not exactly know what to make of this information.

"Well, if you can't read will you have the kindness to inform me how on earth you came to the conclusion that you had never seen my name before?"

"Shure, if it was a name dat I well knew, I'd be afther knowing it again no matther where I put me two eyes on it."

"Oh! I see; that explanation is reasonable enough."

"Yis, sur," but the Irishman never evinced any idea of going on his errand.

"Take the card in, please, and say to your mistress that its owner would like to have the pleasure of seeing her for a few minutes."

The Irishman nodded, and then after a careful glance around, as if to be sure that no one was playing the spy upon them, came close to the other, and said in a very mysterious manner, dropping his voice to a whisper:

"Yer honor, is there anything that you'd be afther likin' to say to Paddy, the Gosssoon?"

The stranger evidently perceived that he had to deal with a decided original and feeling a disposition to humor the man, replied:

"No, there isn't anything in particular that I wish to say, only to beg you be quick and I will give you a coin for your trouble," he replied, pleasantly, drawing a quarter from his pocket and tendering it to the Irishman.

But Paddy, the Gosssoon, as he called himself, repelled the proffered coin with a wave of his hand and drew his oddly-shaped form up in what was intended to be an extremely dignified manner.

"Oho! sorra a bit of of yer silver do I want—not a piece of it shall cross my hand!"

"But I'm afther understanding yer honor; a wink is as good as a nod to a blind horse, any day in the week!"

"The time may come whin ye'll be afther sp'aking out, an be the Rock of Cashel, it's Paddy, the Gosssoon that ye'll find to the fore, ivery time!"

And then after a series of mysterious winks, accompanied by such ludicrous contortions of the face that involuntarily compelled an expression of amusement to appear on the stranger's features, the Irishman departed.

"A most decided character," Tripoli murmured, "an original, if ever there was one!"

In a few minutes Paddy returned, conducting a young lady, and as the stranger gazed upon her the thought came into his mind that she was as fair a girl as he had ever looked upon.

In person she was about the medium hight, with a finely proportioned figure and a face as perfect as ever painter put on canvas, or sculptor carved in silent marble.

She was a blonde, with eyes as blue as the heavens above, and hair as golden yellow as the plumed banners of the ripening corn.

Her complexion was almost faultless, pure red and white, fit match for her blue eyes and golden hair.

She was extremely lady-like in her bearing and walked with a grace that would surely have excited the envy of the most polished stage queen.

The stranger looked upon the girl in amazement.

He was not prepared to meet so charming a creature.

But his stern, stolid face did not in the least betray the thoughts surging through his brain.

He bowed as she advanced, apparently as unconcerned as though she had been an old woman of sixty instead of a beautiful girl of eighteen, exquisite enough in her loveliness to capture the heart of the greatest woman-hater that ever existed.

In her hand she held the card which he had intrusted to the care of the Irishman.

"Mr. Osman Tripoli?" she said in a tone of question, glancing at the card upon which was inscribed the name which she had spoken.

"Yes, miss, so I am called," he replied. "I am a stranger in this country and some years ago in Egypt I was fortunate enough to be able to do Mr. Reginald Ashburnham a service and in the warmth of his gratitude he made me promise that if I ever came to America I would make his house my home while I remained in the country."

"I have come in fulfillment of my promise and I am met with the sad tidings that the world knows him no more."

The face of the beautiful girl clouded over and she shook her head sadly.

"Alas, it is only too true," she said.

"Words cannot express the grief I feel, for he was to me like a brother."

"His loss was a terrible blow to all who knew him," the lady remarked.

"Was it recently?"

"No, some eighteen months ago."

"It is strange that the intelligence did not reach me—yet it is not, now that I recall where I was at the time," the gentleman observed, musingly.

"I was then traveling in the deserts of the Upper Nile and never by any chance saw any newspaper until it was at least two months old, and then the old journals that came in my way were foreign sheets which devoted but little space to the affairs of this country."

"Have I the pleasure of addressing a relative of my much esteemed friend?"

"I was his sister-in-law."

"And the lady who shared his heart and home?"

"Ah, sir, we do not know what has become of her," the girl replied with a deep sigh.

"If you will have the kindness to walk into the parlor I will relate all the particulars of the great calamity to you, the result of which has been to make me mistress of this mansion, and as its mistress I trust you will accept the invitation which I freely tender you to make this house your home while you remain in the country."

"Mr. Ashburnham was fully as dear to me as if he had been my own brother, and I will gladly do aught in my power for any friend of his."

"Miss—I beg pardon—your name I know not."

"Molander—Constance Molander."

"Miss Molander, in my heart I feel grateful to you for the kind invitation and I will accept it in the same frank spirit in which it is tendered."

This, with a graceful, courtly bow, as though he was paying his homage to some great Eastern potentate.

The girl acknowledged the bow and then led the way to the parlor.

It was a magnificently furnished apartment, on the right of the hall.

The lady motioned her guest to a comfortable-looking easy-chair, and then seated herself upon the sofa.

"It is a sad story," she began, "and the lapse of time does not in the least seem to lessen the grief I feel."

"If I was sure that my sister was dead, possibly I could in time become reconciled to the fact, but this uncertainty is horrible; but listen to the recital, and then you can understand and appreciate my feelings."

And then she detailed all the particulars of the heavy blows which had fallen with such crushing weight upon the inmates of the ill-omened mansion, Raven Towers.

Tripoli was, of course, acquainted with the tale, as the reader knows, having received all the particulars from the talkative old man, Uncle Billy Snyder.

But he did not inform the lady of the circumstance, as he desired to ascertain whether the old man had delivered to him the full account, or had inadvertently suppressed some import-

ant particulars; but when the girl had finished, he saw that the old man had not failed to relate the story exactly as it was.

At the close of the recital there was silence for a few moments; the brows of the gentleman were knitted as if he was in deep thought, and then, abruptly, he spoke.

"Miss Molander, I am a total stranger to you, but toward your hapless sister, the wife of my honored friend, I feel as if she were an old and dear acquaintance."

"In the Egyptian desert, when, attacked by the wild sons of the wilderness, the children of the burning sands—men who hold their lives as lightly as the curled darling of fortune does the gold which he casts so recklessly away, Reginald Ashburnham and myself stood shoulder to shoulder, like two brothers, and gave desperate battle for our lives."

"A well-aimed shot struck my friend in the side, and he sunk bleeding at my feet; but, as the swarthy warriors closed in upon us, with my trusty revolvers I made them pay so dearly for their rashness, that out of the ten men who had attacked us, only two had strength to fly from my deadly fire; and my very first shot let loose the soul of the man who had wounded my friend."

"From that time we were brothers; and now that I come to this new world and find that a dread calamity has descended upon the roof-tree of my friend, the blood stirs warmly within my veins, and bids me devote myself to solving the dark mystery."

"Will you accept my aid? Will you allow me, an amateur, dusky-faced detective, to try my skill in this matter, where the regular sleuth-hounds have failed?"

CHAPTER XII.

SEEKING A CLEW.

THE lady was taken completely by surprise, such a proposition being entirely unexpected.

"Oh, sir," she exclaimed, while grateful tears appeared in her eyes, "I fear that I cannot find suitable words to express to you how much I am affected by your generous offer."

"No, no, not generous," he hastened to say in correction.

"I am only paying the debt due from one brother to another. Were the circumstances reversed—were he alive and I dead, and trouble had come upon those near and dear to me, I am satisfied he would never rest content until he had done all in his power to aid those unfortunate ones deprived by the cruel hand of death of their natural protector."

The girl rose impulsively, and advancing to where the gentleman sat, extended her hand.

"Sir, from the very bottom of my heart I thank you for your kindness."

Tripoli rose, clasped the little white hand of the girl in his one broad palm, and then bending low, kissed it with as much respect as though it had been the hand of a queen to whom he owed sworn allegiance.

A quick blush swept over the face as she felt the warm impress of the lips upon her slender fingers, and as he relinquished her hand and resumed his former position she quickly retreated to the sofa, almost frightened at her own boldness; but the next moment she reflected how like a foolish child she was acting, and she almost smiled at her own folly.

"No, Miss Constance," he remarked, "I am only acting strictly in the line of duty. If I understand the case, you have no natural protector upon whom you can call."

"You are right, sir; I haven't a single relative in the world."

"And in this dreadful trouble who has taken charge of matters?"

"Mr. Ashburnham's confidential man of business, Mr. Obadiah Weathercroft. He is a very able gentleman indeed. He was with Mr. Ashburnham for three years, and when he died, my sister was very glad to have the advantage of Mr. Weathercroft's advice."

"It was but natural under the circumstances. What sort of a gentleman is Mr. Weathercroft, and how do you like him?—please understand, I do not ask these questions out of mere idle curiosity, but only to arrive at conclusions which will aid me in the task I have undertaken."

"Try and look upon me in the light of a brother, stranger though I am. Trust me, and believe me when I say you will have no cause to regret it."

"I do trust you most fully!" the girl replied, earnestly. "I hardly know how it is, but it seems to me as if you were not a stranger, but an old and long-tried friend."

"Try and think of me as such, and I assure you that you will never have any reason to regret it."

"Well, to answer your question frankly in regard to Mr. Weathercroft," Constance observed after a momentary pause, as if to collect her thoughts, "I really do not exactly know what I think of the gentleman. In fact, now that you recall the subject to my mind, I am obliged to confess I do not know that I have ever thought of him particularly in my life."

"That is strange."

"No, I do not think it really is so, and I be-

lieve you will not wonder at it when I explain the circumstances.

"Mr. Weathercroft is rather an elderly man, and so quiet and unobtrusive in his ways that one would hardly notice there was such a person in the house.

"After graduating, when I came to make my home at Raven Towers with my sister, some three years ago, I found Mr. Weathercroft here, and was introduced to him of course, but up to the time of my sister's mysterious disappearance I do not really think we exchanged a hundred words together, for he is a man who never speaks until he is spoken to, and so I came to regard him as one of the fixtures appertaining to the establishment, and never took the trouble to question whether I liked the man or disliked him."

"I can understand the feeling."

"And when the terrible calamity came and I was obliged to assume the position of mistress of Raven Towers, Mr. Weathercroft and I were naturally brought more in contact, but even then I never thought of analyzing my feelings toward him."

"But now that you have been brought face to face with the subject, what think you?"

The girl remained silent for a few moments, her taper fingers toying with one of the costly rings that adorned her hands.

"I'm afraid that I shall have to answer that you have given me a riddle which I cannot solve," she said at last.

"I cannot say that I particularly like him, and most certainly I do not dislike him, for I have not the slightest cause to do so."

"I am afraid that the truth of the matter is I look upon him just in the same light—notwithstanding that we have lived together in the same house for so long—as I would the clerk in the store, who waits upon me when I go shopping."

"So long as he is polite and attentive, shows me what I wish to see, and doesn't annoy me by trying to induce me to purchase what I do not want, I mentally pronounce him in my mind to be a nice man, but it is doubtful if I would know him again if I were to meet him in the street ten minutes afterward."

"I understand the feeling; he is to you more like a machine than a man."

"Yes, I am afraid that is the truth, although it ought not to be so, for he has been very useful and kind when this unexpected burden fell upon my young shoulders."

"He, I presume, took full charge of the investigation into the circumstances connected with your sister's mysterious disappearance."

"Yes, sir; he came and consulted me in regard to the matter when it was discovered that my sister was not in the house and that no traces could be found indicating whither she had gone, but I was so overcome by grief that I was not in a fit state to give any orders or counsel in the matter, and so I simply told him to do what he thought was best."

"And then he called upon the detectives to investigate the case, and reported to me daily in regard to the matter."

"I see; he did not wish you to be kept in ignorance, but when the detectives came to their final conclusion that Mrs. Ashburnham had eloped with the gardener I should think he would have hesitated before acquainting you with such a suspicion so degrading in its nature."

"He did—he was reluctant to acquaint me with the truth, but I perceived that he was not telling me all—I guessed from his manner that he was keeping something from me and I insisted upon learning all the particulars, and then upon my urgent entreaty, in as delicate a manner as possible, he made known to me the ridiculous conclusion at which these so-called detectives had arrived," and the beautiful lips of the girl curled in disdain as she reflected upon the absurd accusation.

"And what did Mr. Weathercroft have to say about it? Did he express any opinion in regard to the matter?"

"I do not exactly remember," the lady replied, endeavoring with all her power to call back the memories of the past.

"I was so indignant at the time at the stupidity of the detectives in arriving at such a ridiculous conclusion that I really forget whether he expressed any opinion or not."

"If he did I do not remember what it was."

"He did not then take decided ground that the detectives were right in their surmise?" Tripoli asked after a moment's reflection.

"Oh, no, I am sure that he did not, for if he had I would have been terribly offended, so much so that it would have been a difficult matter for me to have ever regarded him with friendly eyes again."

"You seem to be quite certain upon this point."

"Oh, yes, I am sure he did not express any decided opinion. In fact, as far as I can recollect he didn't express any opinion at all, merely contenting himself with reporting what the detectives said."

"Well, I will do what I can to unravel this tangled skein, and as in all such cases it is best to work strictly in the dark, and not allow any

one to suspect that an investigation is on foot, will you do me the favor not to disclose to a single soul that I have taken any interest in this affair?"

"Allow everybody to suppose that I am sojourning here merely for the purpose of seeing the country, and if there is any one in the house who knows aught of the matter I may be able to catch them off their guard and secure a clew which will lead to the unraveling of this dark mystery."

The eyes of the lady opened with surprise as she listened to the words of the stranger.

This was the first time that it had ever been suggested to her that some of the inmates of the house might know something in regard to the disappearance of her sister.

The detectives, when they had been called in to investigate the case, proceeded on this assumption immediately, but as they had kept the matter to themselves, no one of the household had suspected that the sleuth-hounds were seeking for the explanation of the mysterious disappearance of Mrs. Ashburnham in Raven Towers itself.

"Certainly I will be guided entirely by you in this matter for though you are a stranger yet something tells me that I can trust you," the girl confessed with a charming smile.

"Be assured you will never have reason to regret honoring me with your confidence. And now to business; there are some particulars that I must learn from you, for if I were to inquire of others it might excite suspicion."

"Are the inmates of the house at present the same as when your sister disappeared?"

The lady paused for a moment, reflecting upon the question, and then answered.

"Yes, I think so; I do not remember that any one has left."

"And no new ones have come?"

"No, sir, none at all."

"Who, besides yourself and Mr. Weathercroft are in the house?"

"There is the housekeeper, Sarah Martin, an aged woman, who came here some six or seven years ago; Polly Thompson, my maid, a nice, quiet English girl, Mary Murphy, the chambermaid, who is something of a greenhorn, and Bridget O'Neil the cook, who has an assistant her daughter, Flora, a girl of fourteen."

"Then there is John Jamison, the butler, Peter Mack, the gardener, Robin Hedden the coachman and Paddy Kelly, the little man who admitted you, an odd genius who can turn his hand to almost anything."

"He is an old servant and was with Mr. Ashburnham's father for many years, and on account of his long services and oddities he is a sort of privileged character and does about as he pleases. But here comes Mr. Weathercroft," she added, suddenly, as she caught sight of the gentleman approaching.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PLOTTERS.

ATTRACTED by her words, Tripoli gazed out of the window.

Both were so seated that they commanded a view of the main approach to the house.

Two gentlemen were coming up the walk; one was a middle-aged man, thick-set and muscular in build, and with a face that had a good deal of the bulldog about it, despite the fact that the owner was dressed entirely in black, with a white necktie, which seemed to give him rather a clerical appearance.

His companion was a tall, blonde-haired, blonde-whiskered young man, well-dressed but with a decidedly English air about him.

At the first glance, the observant man of the world would have decided that he was a Briton on his travels.

He was rather a good-looking fellow, yet there was a certain something about his face which would not have impressed a close observer favorably.

Probably the critic, if called upon to give a reason for his idea that the young man was not what he should be, would have been puzzled to explain, but he would have stuck to his idea all the same.

"The elder of the two is Mr. Weathercroft," Constance explained.

"And his companion?"

"Is an English gentleman, making a tour of America. He brought letters of introduction from English friends of Mr. Ashburnham, who gave them in ignorance of the death of the person to whom they were addressed. Something like your own case, you see."

Tripoli nodded.

"He is quite a notable personage across the water, I presume," she added, smiling. "One of the aristocracy; possibly you know him by reputation if not personally. He casts aside his title while on his travels, and is known as plain George Frederick Gordon; but Mr. Weathercroft tells me confidentially that he is one of the English nobility, and at home is called Lord Gordon."

"And how do you like his lordship?" asked the other, a faint trace of incredulity plainly visible on his features.

"Well, I hardly know," the girl replied, slowly. "He is very agreeable and quite en-

tertaining. He has traveled extensively, and his descriptions of the various countries he has visited are extremely interesting. But do you know him?"

"No, I have never met him; but the name of Lord Gordon is familiar to me."

"So I presumed. Mr. Weathercroft, who is an Englishman by birth, says that he is a scion of one of the oldest families in England, and is the direct heir to a most magnificent estate, worth a million of pounds, I think he said, besides being independently wealthy from the large bequest which came to him from his mother."

"Such a description is enough to turn the head of the average American girl," the gentleman remarked, smiling.

"I must be an exception to the rule then for I assure you the report of his wealth has not made the slightest impression upon me except to put me a little upon my guard and make me cautious in deciding whether he was nice or not."

"In making up my mind not to be influenced in his favor by reports of his wealth and the high position he occupied in English society, I think it is more than probable that I was a little disposed to look upon him with a more critical eye than I would have otherwise done."

At this point the steps of the gentlemen sounding in the hall without put a stop to the conversation.

The pair entered and Constance, rising, introduced Tripoli to them.

The searching eyes of the Dusky Detective were bent in keen scrutiny upon the two, although apparently he was not regarding them with any particular interest and he fancied he saw from the expression upon the faces of both the men that his presence in the house was not agreeable to either of them.

Briefly, Miss Constance explained who the gentleman was—why he had visited the mansion, and related how he had accepted her invitation to partake of the hospitalities of Raven Towers.

Mr. Weathercroft responded that he would do all in his power to make the gentleman comfortable while he dwelt within the gates of the mansion.

Lord Gordon acknowledged the introduction with an elaborate bow, but there was a certain formality in his manner which seemed to indicate that he was not particularly impressed with the dark-faced stranger who bore so strange a name.

Conversation upon unimportant topics was indulged in for a few minutes and then Miss Constance excused herself on the plea of an engagement and withdrew.

After her departure Weathercroft suggested that Mr. Tripoli might wish to inspect his room and the Irishman was summoned.

"Patrick, show this gentleman to the blue room," he said, when the odd-looking son of the Emerald Isle made his appearance.

"My luggage is at the hotel in the city," the stranger explained, "and I will go immediately and have it sent up."

"I am an old traveler and do not bother myself with any more traps than I can possibly help, so one small trunk is all I carry."

"I will send after it," Mr. Weathercroft hastened to say.

"Oh, no, I couldn't think of putting you to that trouble; besides I've a little business to which I must attend personally so I will have to visit the city anyway."

"We dine at five," Weathercroft remarked.

"I shall return before that hour."

And then the stranger departed, conducted by the Irishman.

Weathercroft escorted the guest to the door in the most obsequious manner. A peculiar cringing politeness invariably marked Weathercroft's manner toward every one with whom he came in contact, high or low, and this went a great way toward making him popular with all classes.

Even when compelled to refuse a favor he did it with such grace—such an apparent willingness to perform the service, if stern circumstances did not prevent him, that the refusal was robbed of half its disappointment.

But after the sound of the footsteps of the Irishman and the stranger died away in the hall, and he turned to the young Englishman who was lazily reclining in a half-sitting posture upon one of the luxuriant sofas, the expression upon his face totally changed, and a dark, forbidding look took the place of the bland, smirking smile which he had previously worn.

"What do you think of him?" he asked, crossing the room to where the young man reclined on the sofa, taking an arm-chair which stood within a yard of the other and seating himself in it as he spoke.

"I don't admire him," responded Lord Gordon after a moment's reflection.

"Neither do I."

"There's something about his ugly, black face that I don't like, and what a pair of eyes he has, too; regular gimlet eyes, calculated to look a fellow through and through."

"A pair of interrogation points, in fact,"

Weathercroft observed with a disagreeable little laugh.

"Yes, and they rather make a fellow feel uncomfortable, don't you know?"

"It is deuced unlucky for us, I fear, this party making his appearance at this time," Weathercroft remarked, slowly, and after debating the matter over in his mind for a few minutes.

"Well, I don't think that it will be to our advantage to have this duffer quartered in the house, because in the little game that we are playing we don't want any lookers-on."

"No, no, decidedly not!"

"It's a deuced shame too!" the young man cried, abruptly, "for we have been making the running so splendidly that the prize seemed to be entirely in our hands."

"Yes, yes, it is extremely unfortunate," Weathercroft murmured, and then he fell to musing for a few minutes.

"Gordon," he said abruptly, addressing the young man in the most familiar manner and dropping his peculiar servile way entirely. "I have been thinking about this Mr. Tripoli and I have come to the conclusion that I have seen him before somewhere."

"The deuce you say!" exclaimed the young man, apparently startled by the information, and rising to a sitting posture.

"Yes, I am certain of it, and yet I am not able to remember when or where I met him, but my impression is that his presence here bodes no good to us or to our little game."

"Do you think he is a spy?" asked the other, an anxious tone plainly perceptible in his voice.

"Either that, or an adventurer in search of game."

"Opposition is the life of trade, you know," suggested the young man.

"Not a bit of it," replied the other. "A more shallow humbug was never gotten up, and in this little game that we are playing we don't want any partners. Everything is all right, now, eh?"

"Oh, yes; the girl seems pleased at my attention, and I give her lots of taffy, and she takes it all in, and hasn't the slightest suspicion that my talk about my princely estate in England and the way I live when I am at home is all bosh."

"I must say that she don't seem to be particularly sweet on me, but then she is such an innocent thing, and so deuced bashful, that I don't believe she would admit she liked me until it came to the point where she couldn't help herself."

"I have done all I could for you in a quiet way," Weathercroft remarked. "And my impression is that she will accept you when the proper time comes for you to offer yourself."

"I have laid a great deal of stress upon the splendid position that the wife of a man like yourself occupies in English society, and like nearly all these American girls, she has an idea that it must be extremely pleasant to be on familiar terms with the lords and ladies of the Old World. The glamour of rank has dazzled her eyes, and although I must confess I don't see any particular signs to make me imagine she has fallen over head and ears in love with you, yet I think the impression you have made upon her is quite favorable enough to induce her to accept you when you offer yourself."

"That is all I want, of course. It doesn't matter two coppers to me whether she loves me or not so long as she marries me," the young man remarked, complacently.

"Certainly; I understand that."

"The girl is pretty enough, a charming creature, and I'm quite willing to take her, but the fact that she's worth a couple of millions or so decidedly enhances her beauty, for I don't think I would be willing to sell myself without being well paid for it."

"My dear Gordon, do you know I have a fear that the coming of this stranger will upset all of our plans!" Weathercroft exclaimed, abruptly.

"In that case, then, the quicker we get rid of him the better."

"Decidedly! But how is it to be done?"

"Leave that to me," Gordon replied, in his airy way. "I will admit that I took a dislike to the fellow at first sight, and as I have an objection to his remaining here, I will take measures to get rid of him in a quiet way you understand?"

The other nodded. He knew enough of the young Englishman to feel satisfied that he knew what he was about.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE INTERVIEW.

AFTER a few more unimportant words the two at the suggestion of the young Englishman sauntered out to the lawn in front of the house.

"When this dusky rascal starts for the depot on his return to the city, I will accompany him and on the road to the railway station I will improve the opportunity to unbosom myself to him," Gordon remarked.

"I flatter myself that I can persuade him not to return to Raven Towers."

Weathercroft smiled, showing his teeth in a wolf-like fashion, and taking the young man by the hand pressed it warmly.

"My dear Gordon, that man is dangerous, I can feel it in my bones!"

"He is here sailing under false colors. The name he has given is not his own. It is strange that I cannot remember where I have met him or when, but I am satisfied that his presence here will be apt to interfere materially with our plans and now at the very moment of success, when the cup is at our lips, as it were, to have it dashed to the ground by the hand of this intruding stranger is really too much."

"My dear old boy, don't worry yourself at all about that matter. If the fellow has come here under a false name and is not what he seems, you can depend upon it that I will speedily get rid of him."

"Do the best you can for this heiress and her rich estate is surely worth a struggle."

"Exactly, and I'm the lad to try the game for all it is worth!"

The appearance of Mr. Tripoli in the doorway of the mansion at this moment put an end to the conversation.

"Are you going to the city Mr.—ah—I beg pardon, what did you say your name was?"

"Tripoli, sir."

"Tripoli?"

"Yes, sir, Osman Tripoli."

"Deuced odd name that," the young Englishman remarked. "It isn't any wonder that I should have failed to remember it."

"Let me see, isn't Tripoli the name of a country, or something of that sort?"

"In this case it is the name of a man," the other replied with a quiet smile.

"Ah, yes, I see, that's rather a joke that you are getting off, but I've such a dull head for that sort of thing that unless the joke is almost strong enough to knock me down I never see it."

"And your first name, that is about as odd as your second."

"Oh, no, Osman is a good old English name and one that in ancient days was proudly worn by more than one great English earl."

"Yes, yes, I suppose so, but my ancient history is so deuced rusty that I really must plead ignorance of all knowledge on the subject."

"But, as I was going to say, if you are going to the depot, I will walk with you as far as the station, as I wish to see if an express parcel that I expect has arrived yet."

"I shall be glad of your company, sir," Tripoli remarked, with a polite inclination of the head.

Then both nodded to Weathercroft and moved toward the gate.

Not a word was exchanged between the two until they were out of sight of Raven Towers, although only a few hundred yards from the house, but the road sweeping around an abrupt and wooded bend, was hidden by the foliage from the mansion.

"Mr.—er—er—" began the Englishman.

"Tripoli, Osman Tripoli," said the other with perfect calmness, as if it was the most natural thing in the world for everybody to blunder over his name at the slightest provocation.

"Ah, yes, Mr. Tripoli—well, Mr. Tripoli, I think I would like to have a few minutes' serious conversation with you, if you haven't any objection."

"Not the least in the world," replied Tripoli, without evincing the slightest curiosity in regard to the subject, as a man might be expected to do upon being abruptly invited to a private conference by an almost entire stranger.

Just as Tripoli answered, the two came to a point where a small lane ran from the road toward the river.

This lane marked the southern boundaries of the grounds belonging to Raven Towers.

"At the end of the lane by the river there is a nice, quiet spot where we can converse, without fear of either being interrupted or overheard."

A peculiar gleam came into the eyes of Tripoli for a moment, just as if he had asked himself why the young man desired a private conference with him, and why was he so particular that no one should disturb or interrupt the interview.

But he did not put his thoughts into words, contenting himself with a simple nod only.

The two turned into the lane, and continued in it until they came to the river, where there was a small dock projecting into the water.

Ten or fifteen feet north of the dock, and within the grounds of Raven Towers was an elaborate boat-house, built out over the water.

A stone wall marked the line of the mansion's grounds, and upon the projecting coping-stone of the wall, Gordon seated himself—it was only about a couple of feet high, just right for a lounging-place.

With a careless wave of the hand he motioned for his companion to take a seat upon the wall.

"Prepare to make yourself as comfortable as possible, old boy," he said, "because I have an idea that what I am about to say to you will not be particularly pleasant, so you may as well prepare to take it as comfortably as you can."

Tripoli's face was as impassive as the face of a graven image, and the young Englishman, who had been watching him closely in order to see what impression his words made, was decidedly astonished.

He had expected to see a look of amazement, if not of apprehension, upon the features of the other, and the total indifference displayed by Tripoli perplexed him.

"Upon my word," he muttered under his breath, "he's a deuced cool hand, whoever he is!"

Tripoli merely nodded, and settled himself upon the stone wall.

"It's deuced awkward to be obliged to do a thing of this sort, you know," the Englishman began, "but I don't really see any other way in which I can avoid it."

Again Tripoli merely nodded, and Gordon began to realize that he had undertaken a harder task than he anticipated.

"You see, my dear boy, I am a man of the world, and in my time have seen a thing or two," he went on.

"Now, you know, old fellow, I don't want to be hard on you, but I am obliged to say that your little game in this quarter is up. The fact is, I know you!"

"Yes?"

"Oh, yes, I've met you across the water, and then you didn't call yourself by any such outlandish name as the one you now bear."

"And what was I called then?"

Calmly, and without the slightest sign of agitation, Tripoli put the question.

"Oh, you are too much for me; I can't remember that; but I am perfectly sure that you were not known as Tripoli."

"In fact, I have an idea that I have met you in England and on the Continent, under half a dozen names, none of which was your true one, of course," and there was a very perceptible sneer on the face of the Englishman as he finished the sentence.

"Will you allow me to say that you are mistaken—that you have never met me masquerading under half-a-dozen different names, and that, although I am perfectly well acquainted with you, I feel absolutely sure you do not know me as well," Tripoli replied, speaking in the most matter-of-fact manner possible.

"Oh, you know me, do you?" Gordon exclaimed, knitting his brows together, and plainly betraying the annoyance he felt at the information.

"Yes, I recognized you immediately, although I never happened to come in personal contact with you."

"You didn't say anything about it when we were introduced," the Englishman remarked in an ugly sort of way.

"No, I did not consider that it was necessary. I might remind you that you did not say anything about having met me when we first met."

"I wasn't certain about the matter and waited until I was satisfied," the other blurted out.

"The explanation seems reasonable enough," Tripoli observed.

"But I am getting away from the point I had in view when I determined to have a little quiet, private talk with you," the Englishman remarked.

"Proceed to the point then at once."

"I will. As I said before, your little game won't work here, and as you have been detected, the quicker you take your departure, the better it will be for you."

"You will forgive me, I am sure, for not exactly understanding your meaning when I say that nature has made me somewhat dull of comprehension. I am not good at reading riddles. That you wish me to depart is of course perfectly plain, but why I should yield to your wish or what my game consists of is a mystery."

"Bosh!" exclaimed Gordon, rudely. "Why do you attempt to deceive me? I'm no shallow-pated fool! I can see what your game is easily enough."

"You are an adventurer and have come here with a cock-and-bull story about being a dear friend of the dead Ashburnham, for the purpose, first, of gaining admittance to Raven Towers, and then making this young heiress your prey. Oh, it would be a rich prize for such a man as you to secure, this girl with her millions."

"You could go back to Europe and act a swell that would open the eyes of the London blades and the Parisian sharpers, but as I happen to be in the way, you will not be able to do it."

"I must leave Raven Towers, then?"

The question was put in such a cool, deliberate way that the Englishman did not know exactly what to make of it.

There was not a trace of passion in the man's voice or manner, and Gordon could not help thinking that he was by all odds the coolest hand that he had ever run across.

"Decidedly, I can't permit an adventurer like yourself to abuse the hospitality of any friend of mine, particularly when the party is such a charming girl as Constance Molander."

"She is a beautiful girl and appears to be as good as she is beautiful."

"Oh, she's a daisy," responded Lord Gordon, dropping into the current slang of the day as if he had been accustomed to it all his life.

"And, by-the-by, to in a measure solace the disappointment which no doubt you feel at having your plans upset so abruptly, let me tell you

that you don't stand the least chance to succeed, for the girl is my affianced wife, and if anybody gets the handling of her money it will be a gentleman about my size.

"I'm willing to do the fair thing with you. If you're strapped for money, I'll give you fifty or a hundred to stake you—as these Americans say—for some new venture."

"I'm extremely obliged to you for your really generous offer," Tripoli remarked, in his quiet way.

"I presume you are a believer in the old Spanish proverb which says build a bridge of silver for a flying enemy."

"And so you are to marry Miss Constance?"

"Yes, the matter is settled between the young lady and myself, although we have not made the affair public yet, and in fact it is probable that we will be married quietly without taking the world at large into our confidence, for Constance is a quiet little puss, and hates display, and I am not anxious to publish to the world either that I am the proud possessor of an heiress worth millions."

"No, it would not be advisable."

There was a peculiar ring to the voice of the other as he uttered the simple sentence which grated harshly on the ears of the young Englishman.

"Why wouldn't it be advisable?" he retorted, angrily.

"Because it might lead to the discovery that you are not the man you pretend to be," the other replied, without a trace of excitement perceptible.

"By Jove! you had better take care!" Gordon exclaimed, springing to his feet in anger.

"I'll have you to understand, my fine fellow, I have called men out and laid them on their back for presuming to talk far less insolently than you did just now."

"You won't call me out, and if you did I shouldn't come," the other remarked, also rising to his feet and confronting the Englishman.

CHAPTER XV.

THE ENGLISHMAN MEETS HIS MASTER.

THERE was quite a contrast between the two men as they faced each other.

Tripoli was as cool as an iceberg while the young Englishman had allowed his anger to get the better of his judgment and was very much excited.

"And why wouldn't you come?" Gordon demanded.

"I should decline on the ground that you are not worthy to meet a man whose hands are clean, record good, and who can face the world without fear."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the young man, "you really amuse me!"

But despite his words there was very little trace of merriment in his voice.

"And now pray have the kindness to explain your words. What do you mean by your insinuation that I am not all right?"

"You are called George Frederick Gordon, I believe."

"Yes, that is my name! Do you dare to say it isn't?" cried the Englishman threateningly.

"No, for I know it is your name, but you further claim I believe that in England you are called Lord Gordon and that you are the head of the old and famous Gordon house."

"So I am!" cried the other, angry fires blazing in his eyes.

"The head of the Gordon family is a young man about your age and he has been put to a great deal of trouble by a distant relative, a cousin many times removed, who bears the same name, but really stands no more chance of ever inheriting the ancestral estates than he does of becoming emperor of China."

"This distant relative has got into all sorts of scrapes, more or less disgraceful, and in nine cases out of ten he has represented that he is the Gordon instead of the poor relation without a penny to his name."

"Your story is correct enough, and the young man has troubled me greatly," responded Gordon, endeavoring to assume a dignity befitting the occasion.

"Then you are the head of the Gordon family and not the impostor?"

"The question is ridiculous. I am Lord Gordon!" the other cried, angrily.

"And you are going to marry this young lady, the mistress of Raven Towers, Constance Molander?"

"I am."

"But how can you since only one short month ago, if you are the genuine Lord Gordon, you married an English peeress?"

"It's a lie!" hissed the young man fiercely, almost beside himself with passion.

"Oh, no, it's the truth as I can easily prove by sending a cable message across the water!"

"You scoundrel!" cried the Englishman, abruptly, and he made a violent blow at the head of Tripoli.

The dark-faced stranger was on his guard though, for the expression in the eye of the other had warned him that he intended to attack.

With the skill of a practiced boxer, he parried the blow and with one tremendous stroke of his

strong right arm, delivered full in the face, smashed Gordon down as though he had only been a boy of tender years.

The Englishman was game, if he was a rascal, and, notwithstanding the punishment he had received, was on his feet again in an instant, and rendered more cautious by the lesson which he had received, did not attempt to rush in and demolish his antagonist at a single blow.

Like the majority of young men of the English-speaking breed he rather prided himself upon his skill with his fists and now sought to turn that knowledge to account.

But in this affair he was terribly over-matched.

His antagonist was his superior in every way.

A better boxer and a far stronger man, as the other soon discovered, when he essayed another attack.

Again the powerful right arm of the Dusky Detective felled the young Englishman as though he had been a log, and this time his head struck the hard ground with such violence that the shock of the concussion stunned him.

It was fully five minutes before the fallen man recovered his senses, and then he slowly rose to a sitting posture and looked around him in a dazed manner, as though he did not comprehend what had occurred.

Finally his eyes rested upon the man who had dealt him the terrible blow and a scowl of anger overspread his countenance.

Slowly he rose to his feet.

He did not attempt to renew the contest.

The rough handling he had received convinced him that he stood no chance in a fisticuff match with his scientific and powerful antagonist.

"You're too much for me!" he cried, angrily, "and I'm not such a fool as not to know when I've enough."

"It's your own fault; you wanted war and you ought not to complain."

"But—curse the luck! I didn't understand that you could handle your fists like a prize-fighter, else I would have fought shy of you. As it is you have battered me so that I won't be fit to face the public eye for a week or so."

This was the truth.

The terrible blows which he had received had sadly disfigured his face.

"You are not quite so handsome as you were before this little unpleasantness, but I feel quite sure your stock of knowledge is materially increased," Tripoli remarked.

"From what you have said I think I gather that you don't want any more of this sort of thing."

"No, I'm satisfied."

"And now in regard to your statement that you are engaged to be married to this young lady—that's a falsehood, isn't it?"

"No, it isn't!" the other replied, sulkily.

"Come, come, speak the truth; lying will not serve you, for I can very easily get at the facts in the case, as I shall go to the young lady and ask her about it."

The face of the young Englishman grew purple with rage and for a moment he seemed to meditate another attack, but there was a glitter in the eyes of the Dusky Detective which caused him to hesitate.

"You scoundrel! I'll be the death of you one of these days for this!" he cried in his wild rage.

"Oh, no, you won't; I'm not in the least afraid of that," Tripoli replied, contemptuously.

"Barking dogs seldom bite, and fellows of your kidney, although usually profuse enough with threats, do not often back them up by deeds."

"I've not the least doubt that you would like to cut my throat, but you will never be able to screw your courage up to the sticking point, so as to do the deed."

"Come, now, you are not really engaged to the girl, although, no doubt, you think there is a fair chance for your becoming her affianced husband in the near future."

"Well, isn't it just the same?" Gordon asked, ed, sulkily.

"Oh, no, not at all, and you know it well enough, and now that I have interested myself in the matter, your chance of securing the young lady's hand is not good."

"What is it to you?" the young Englishman demanded, fiercely.

"Why do you interfere in the matter? Do you want a share in the swag?"

"Swag? meaning plunder I suppose," observed the other in a reflective sort of way.

"That is a word used only by thieves and low-lived vagabonds, and is decidedly out of place in the mouth of a gentleman."

"Bah! don't set yourself up for a teacher!"

"Oh, no, it isn't worth while, but I only mentioned it to show you that the language you use, does not befit a man who claims to be the head of the old Gordon house."

"I suit my language to your comprehension," retorted the other.

"The use of the thieves' argot is not necessary when conversing with me. But to answer your question:

"You ask me if I am after a part of the swag. Suppose I say I am?"

Gordon stared a moment at the cool, matter-of-fact way in which the question was put, and then a light began to dawn upon his brain.

"Oho," he exclaimed, "is that your game?"

"It would be a very good game if it was, wouldn't it?" Tripoli queried with a smile so peculiar that the Englishman did not know exactly what to make of it."

"Pretty tidy for you, maybe," Gordon responded.

"You are playing for a great stake; this girl's estate is worth a million or two, I understand."

"Yes, two at the least."

"And if you marry her, you will be able to have the handling of the money, for she is young and inexperienced and of course will confide implicitly in you, the man she loves."

"Of course, no doubt about that."

"And if a man like myself was in the background, it would be an easy matter for you to throw a few hundreds in my way. Out of such an amount of money, you would never miss it."

"That's true enough, but until I am married to the girl, I won't have a copper to bless myself with. It's as much as I can do now to keep up a decent appearance, and if I didn't have a friend or two, who feel sure I'd pull off the race, I shouldn't be able to make the running."

"There doesn't seem to be a doubt about your getting the girl, unless this confidential business man of her sees fit to interfere."

"Weathercroft?"

"Yes."

"Oh, he's all right. He's a friend of mine, and instead of interfering, he'll do everything in his power to help the thing along."

"Does he stand in to win if you pull off the prize?"

"No regular understanding, of course, because the old fellow is too cautious for that sort of thing; but he knows that, if I get the girl, he can keep on just the same."

"I suppose Weathercroft has feathered his nest pretty well?"

"No doubt of it; and he wouldn't care to have any man marry the girl who would be likely to look carefully into his accounts. He hasn't any fears of my doing any such low thing as that. He knows I'm too much of a gentleman to question his figures. If there should be a few mistakes of a thousand or two in his favor, I wouldn't bother my head about them."

"Does he know that you are not the real Gordon?"

"Stow that!" cried the Englishman, with a nervous glance around.

"Don't talk so loud. I'm Lord Gordon, and he believes it, of course."

"Now then, look here; if you have a mind to keep your mouth shut, I'll do the handsome thing for you after the knot is tied."

The proposition was apparently made in good faith, but Tripoli knew that the impostor didn't mean what he said, but was only trying to gain time, so he met him with his own weapons.

"All right; silence is the word."

"Sorry we didn't come to an understanding before you battered me so badly, for I'll have to be called away by urgent business now for a week."

"Take care of yourself, and keep dark until I see you again."

And with a nod, the adventurer sauntered away.

CHAPTER XVI.

A DARK DECISION.

TRIPOLI seated himself again on the wall, and watched the young Englishman until he disappeared around the turn of the road.

"Is there any truth that we blind humans sometimes have a presentiment of what is about to occur?" he exclaimed aloud, communing with himself.

"It would really seem so, for why did I feel the wild desire which drew me from the Egyptian desert clear across the seas to this land, which I had resolved my eyes should never again look upon?"

"Something whispered to me that my presence was needed here."

"And I had not heard a word, either, in regard to the changes which had taken place in my absence."

"All that I was conscious of was a vague, indefinite, unreasonable longing to once again revisit the old scenes."

"And now that I am here, what do I find?"

"Raven Towers, and the vast estate appertaining to it in the hands of a helpless girl, who is no more fitted to contend with the scoundrels that surround her than a dove is to cope with a flock of hawks."

"I have arrived just in time, and having come to an understanding with this English adventurer, possibly I may be able with his aid to gain the confidence of the confidential man of business, Weathercroft, who is undoubtedly the master-spirit of all the evil that has occurred."

"True for ye!" cried a hoarse voice, much to the astonishment of Tripoli, and the Irishman, Paddy the Gossoon, popped up from behind the boat-house, where he had evidently been concealed.

A well-worn cap was pulled down low on his

shock head, and in his hand he carried a double-barreled, breech-loading shotgun.

"Hallo!" exclaimed Tripoli, in surprise. "Where the deuce did you come from?"

"From behind the house, yer honor," the Irishman replied, with a grin, and at the same time touching his hat respectfully.

"How long have you been there?"

"Jist afther yer honor and that big blaggard kim here."

"Did you hear what passed between us?"

"Ivery word!" exclaimed Paddy, emphatically. "Shure wasn't that phat I was afther?"

"I was afeard the thafe of the world meant mischief, and that was de r'ason why I caught up de gun and kim afther."

"If yees hadn't been able for him, I would have been afther blowing the hull top of his head off, bad 'cess to him for a murdering villain!"

And now Tripoli comprehended that the Irishman had volunteered to fulfill the role of a guardian angel, and at the idea he laughed outright.

The Irishman grinned, as if he considered that there was some good joke about the matter.

"Well, Paddy, why on earth did you take it into your head to do me this good turn?"

"Shure, yer honor, ye know well enough. It's the long mimory I have, and it's mighty glad I am to see yer honor ag'in, no matter phat ye call yerself."

Actuated by a sudden impulse, Tripoli extended his hand, and the Irishman, overjoyed at this signal mark of favor, clasped it in great delight.

"Keep your own counsel, Paddy; don't whisper a word to any one for I have a suspicion that there is trouble ahead, and I've made my appearance in Raven Towers just in time."

"Sorra a wound will I spake!" the Irishman declared.

"Oho, I'm the b'ye that can kape me tongue atune me teeth, do ye mind! You can thrust me, yer honor; shure I'd die before I'd be afther bethraying your secret, long life to ye!"

And with this determination the faithful fellow took his departure.

Tripoli watched his retreating figure for a moment, and then retraced his steps up the lane.

"So far all goes well," he remarked. "If this pair of rogues—for I've no doubt that Weathercroft is a scoundrel—look upon me in the light of a man, who, for a consideration, will wink at rascality, they will not be so closely on their guard, and it may be possible for me to catch them napping."

"But how great a rogue is Weathercroft?"

"Is he a master-scoundrel with brains to plan and hands to execute? a man with a genius great enough to be the author of the terrible crime which has been so carefully concealed from the world? or is he but a petty pilferer, who has only improved his opportunities to feather his nest at the expense of the people who have trusted him so implicitly?"

"That is a question which it is impossible for me to answer at present, but I will solve the riddle and bring to justice the perpetrator of this fiendish crime if it takes all the years of my life."

Animated with this resolve, Tripoli proceeded on his way to the station, where he took a train bound for the city.

Leaving him to pursue his way to the metropolis, we will return to Raven Towers.

Weathercroft had been extremely put out by the unexpected appearance of the stranger, for there was something about Tripoli that seemed to his fancy to threaten danger.

And now when we transport the reader again to the old house, the confidential man of business was in his den, as the rest of the household were wont to term the old-fashioned, wainscoted room which Weathercroft had selected for his business apartment.

It was on the first floor, in the rear of the house, and was the most gloomy apartment in the building.

Before the advent of Mr. Weathercroft it had been used only for a sort of a lumber-room, a place to stow away old rubbish, but when Ashburnham had requested his new man of business to select an apartment to be fitted up as a sort of office, to the surprise of all the inmates of Raven Towers, Weathercroft had picked out the old room, which all who knew anything about the old house looked upon with suspicion, for it was generally known as the ghost's room, and superstitious people affirmed it was haunted.

Weathercroft laughed at the idea, and when stories concerning the strange noises which had been heard in the apartment were related to him, he replied that no doubt the walls were full of rats, and a half a dozen lively rats were quite capable of frightening an army of people inclined to be credulous.

The old stuff which lumbered up the room was removed, the apartment cleaned and furnished according to the ideas of the new-comer, and from the time that Weathercroft took possession of it nothing was heard of the ghosts.

As Mr. Ashburnham remarked—he too put

no faith in the legend of the haunted apartment.

"With the clearing out of the cobwebs and the dust the ghosts have vanished. The broom of modern civilization is too much for them."

Closeted with Weathercroft was the butler of the establishment, a stout, burly fellow, who answered to the name of John Jamison.

He was a comparatively new man in the house having been an inmate of Raven Towers for about a year.

Jamison had not been long in the country and although he was loud in his boasts of the elegant families whom he had served across the water, yet the other servants protested that he acted like a greenhorn, and some went so far as to insinuate a doubt in regard to his ever having filled so responsible a situation as butler in a first-class family before.

But no one ever dared to openly say a word against the butler, for the household soon made the discovery that Weathercroft regarded him with particular favor, and as the power of that gentleman was supreme, no one wished to incur his enmity by disparaging Jamison.

Although the butler dressed with particular care, always wearing a full suit of black broadcloth and a white cravat, and exerted himself to be as civil and polite as possible, yet there was a certain bulldog-like look about him that ill suited with his garb and manners.

Weathercroft was examining the contents of a massive secretary when the butler applied for admission, and after he had entered, the confidential man of business returned to his task.

The door was fastened by a spring latch, so that when it was closed the inmates were secure from intrusion.

"What are you up to, governor?" asked Jamison, in the most familiar way possible, a decided contrast to the usual extremely respectful manner in which he addressed Weathercroft.

"I'm trying to get hold of the tail of a rat."

"Good for you, governor, and if you get a hold stick to it for dear life," Jamison exclaimed, seating himself in an easy-chair a yard from the secretary, as he spoke.

"This dusky-faced fellow—that stranger—what do you make of him?" Weathercroft asked, abruptly.

"I don't like him for a copper, governor," the other replied, decidedly.

"There's something about the fellow that I don't like. He's got an eye like an eagle; a regular gimlet eye, and no mistake, and he's got a way of looking at a chap that makes one feel mighty uncomfortable."

"Yes, a man who sees everything without apparently paying any particular attention to what is going on around him. A dangerous man or else I miss my guess."

"Do you think there is any danger of his interfering with our little game?"

"I fear there is, in fact I had an apprehension that his advent here meant mischief to my plans the moment I set eyes upon him; the idea came to me that he was not what he represented himself to be."

"His face was familiar to me and yet I could not place him."

"But just now in looking over the old stuff in this desk which formerly belonged to Reginald Ashburnham, the former owner of this place, I came across a clew. See!" and Weathercroft passed a faded photograph to Jamison.

It represented a youth just verging on to manhood.

The face was a noble one, full of resolution and strength.

Jamison examined it carefully and then shook his head in a doubtful manner.

"Do you perceive any resemblance between the picture and this Tripoli as he calls himself?" Weathercroft asked.

"Well, yes, there is a resemblance, but the man is so much older than the original of the picture that the likeness is not so distinct as it might be."

"That is the portrait of Stephen Ashburnham, the elder brother of Reginald, who was the owner of this property."

"There's some mystery connected with Stephen and I have never been able to find out much of anything about him."

"The story went that he died abroad some six or eight years ago and for some reason neither Ashburnham nor his wife seemed to care to talk about him, and so I came to the conclusion that he was probably the black sheep of the family."

"I see, I see," and Jamison nodded his head, sagely.

"Now I am satisfied that this Tripoli is Stephen Ashburnham and his presence here under a false name means danger to us. I thought I had managed everything so carefully that we would not be suspected, but with such a man in the house, as I feel sure this Stephen Ashburnham to be, there is danger that a mine may be exploded beneath our feet at any moment, and I have worked too hard to allow myself to be defeated when the prize is almost in my grasp."

"Right you are, governor!" Jamison exclaimed, decidedly. "We can't afford to be beaten now and if this man is in the way, why there's only one thing to be done."

"And are you game to do it?" Weathercroft inquired with a lowering look.

"Just try me, governor, that's all!"

And then the two clasped hands on the dark compact.

CHAPTER XVII.

WEATHERCROFT IS OUTWITTED.

AGREEABLY to his promise, Mr. Tripoli returned to Raven Towers in ample time to dress for dinner.

The inmates of the mansion were somewhat surprised, however, by receiving a note from "Lord" Gordon, announcing that he had been called away by urgent business and that he would not probably be able to return to Raven Towers for eight or ten days.

The young Englishman was so disgusted with his defeat that he did not make any effort to see Weathercroft and relate to him how terribly his plans had miscarried.

That worthy though had shrewdness enough to guess what had occurred.

The Englishman had not succeeded in carrying out the plan which he devised, and knowing Gordon to be inclined to rashness it did not require the wisdom of a prophet to surmise that he had been unwise enough to engage in a personal encounter with the muscular stranger, in which he had come off second best and had been obliged to haul off for repairs.

Neither by word or look, though, did Weathercroft betray that he had any suspicions that there had been a difficulty between the two men; on the contrary he exerted himself to do honor to the stranger who had become the guest of Raven Towers.

In this he was seconded by the young mistress who, although she would have hesitated to acknowledge the fact, was decidedly more impressed with the dark-faced stranger than with any gentleman whom she had ever encountered.

Weathercroft noted this fact, for in her innocence the beautiful girl did not attempt to conceal the interest which she took in the stranger with his wondrous stories of strange adventures in far-off lands.

And the confidential man of business in his heart was wroth, for he was too close an observer not to comprehend that Mr. Tripoli, in the few hours he had been in the house, had succeeded in making a far more favorable impression upon the young heiress than Lord Gordon, although he had been laboring for weeks.

"Enjoy your triumph now," Weathercroft muttered to himself at the close of the repast as he followed the couple to the parlor.

"It will not last long, so make the best of it while you can."

It was a very pleasant evening for the young lady, and she was really surprised when the French clock upon the mantle-piece sounded the hour of ten.

Weathercroft volunteered to conduct Mr. Tripoli to his room, although that gentleman protested that he could not think of putting him to so much trouble.

Constance bid the gentlemen good-night and retired with her maid.

"Wouldn't you like a drop of something strong before you retire?" Weathercroft asked with an insinuating smile.

"I'm not much of a drinker but as a rule I follow the old English custom of taking a night-cap before going to bed and a bit of cheese and a cracker to take the edge off."

"Well, I am not averse to that sort of thing myself," Tripoli responded.

He felt sure that some deep motive was at the bottom of this apparently friendly offer and was glad of an opportunity to allow Weathercroft to develop his game.

"If you will have the kindness to come with me to my den, as I call my little snugery, I will be pleased to do the honors."

"I keep my private stores securely locked up. I am not one of those who believe that a glass of good liquor now and then ever does anybody any harm, but I think it is better for a man in my position to keep such a thing to himself and so I never call upon the servants to administer to my wants, for fear of creating talk."

"That is quite prudent and such a course of action is to be commended."

"There is always talk enough in this world without reason and so I hold that a man can't be too careful."

"Very true—very true indeed."

"If you will have the kindness to follow me I will try to make you comfortable."

Tripoli bowed and Weathercroft led the way to his apartment which was a nicely furnished room on the second story of the mansion in the rear of the building.

Tripoli with his eagle-like eyes took in all the surroundings at a glance.

He had his suspicions in regard to the confidential man of business and was on the lookout for proofs to confirm them, but there wasn't anything in the apartments at all out of the way.

Drawing a comfortable easy-chair to the side of the marble-topped table which stood in the center of the apartment, Weathercroft invited his guest to be seated.

With a polite "Thank you," Tripoli complied.

Weathercroft then went to a closet in a corner of the room, and unlocked it and brought forth a small tray upon which was the half of one of the cannon-ball like Dutch cheeses and a plate of Albert biscuit.

"All I have in the way of drinkable is a little good French brandy," he said, "but if you prefer anything else I can easily get it for you from the wine-cellar."

"There's a fine stock down there. The late Mr. Ashburnham was a generous liver and he always prided himself upon the excellence of his wine-cellar. I have heard good judges in such matters declare that the cellars of Raven Towers held one of the best supplies of liquors to be found in the country."

"I am very much obliged for your kind offer, but the brandy will answer. I am not much of a drinker, and really have very little choice."

"I can vouch for its being a first-class article. It is some that Mr. Ashburnham got for his own private use, through the kindness of a French friend. He gave me a couple of dozen bottles just before he died, and I have finished all but three."

The other merely nodded with a smile, and then as Weathercroft went to the closet after the liquor, took a rapid view of the situation.

"Can it be that he hopes to get me under the influence of the liquor?" the Dusky Detective muttered to himself. "Does he have a suspicion that my visit here bodes no good to him? If that is his game, it won't work, for during my two years' sojourn in Russia I became so accustomed to brandy that it produces but little more effect upon me than so much cider; so if it is his game to get me under the influence of the liquor, thinking that in my drunkenness I will babble of my plans, he will only have his labor for his pains."

The return of Weathercroft to the table with a bottle of brandy which he had procured from the closet, put an end to Tripoli's muttered reflections.

But then, as Weathercroft proceeded to uncork the bottle, a new idea came into Tripoli's mind.

"It may be possible," he mused, "that this brandy is drugged, and, guessing by some subtle instinct that my presence here is dangerous to him, he has determined to remove me, no matter at what risk."

"It is hardly probable, but if this fellow is the dark and dangerous wretch that I take him to be, it may be possible, and therefore it behooves me to be on my guard."

And so, though the Dusky Detective leaned back in his chair with a smile upon his lips, yet his dark eyes watched every movement of the confidential man of business.

Weathercroft had brought out a couple of small glasses, such as are generally used in saloons for whisky, and after extracting the cork of the bottle, an operation which was not an easy one, he pushed one of the glasses over to Tripoli, and placing the bottle upon the table, said:

"Help yourself, and if you are a judge of the article, as no doubt you must be, for the people across the water know decidedly more of such things than we dwellers on this side of the herring-pond, I am sure you will pronounce it to be a first-class tippie."

"The bouquet is certainly admirable," Tripoli remarked as he filled his glass two-thirds full of the generous liquor, still being careful, however, to keep his eyes upon the host.

But it was soon evident to him that there wasn't anything wrong about the brandy, for Weathercroft filled his glass to the very brim, and in his eyes sparkled the joyous light which every old toper feels when he looks upon the potent fluid so dear to his heart.

"Well, here's luck to you, Mr. Tripoli," Weathercroft observed, as he raised his glass to his lips.

The other responded in a suitable manner, and the two men drank.

The brandy was indeed excellent, and the drinkers imbibed it with a relish.

"It's fine stuff, isn't it?" the confidential man of business exclaimed.

"Truly excellent brandy."

And of his own accord, without urging, Tripoli refilled his glass.

Weathercroft followed his example.

And then the confidential man of business dexterously turned the conversation to adventures which the guest had encountered in company with Mr. Reginald Ashburnham during the latter's trip abroad.

The stranger spoke freely and without the slightest reservation, just as if he did not have the slightest suspicion that the other had any object outside of pure curiosity in speaking of the matter.

Meanwhile the brandy-bottle was kept in circulation, for Tripoli did not shirk the liquor in the least, and whenever he noticed that the brandy in the glass of the other was running low, he immediately pushed the bottle over to him with the admonition not to be in the least afraid of it.

Weathercroft, although becoming conscious that he was taking more than was good for him, could not very well refuse, as the other easily kept measure with him, drop by drop.

Feeling the effect of the powerful liquor upon his own head, it became a matter of wonder to him that his companion did not seem to be in the least affected.

Weathercroft was a hard drinker, too, and fancied that there were few heads as hard as his, and as impervious to strong drink, but in this instance he began to believe he had met his master in this peculiar line.

But he had his wits about him for all that his head was beginning to whirl, and gradually he turned the conversation to the subject upon which he desired information.

"Were you acquainted with Mr. Ashburnham's brother, Stephen?" he asked.

The look of surprise which appeared upon the face of the stranger guest seemed to be perfectly natural.

"Mr. Ashburnham's brother!" he repeated in a tone of amazement, as though this was the first time he had ever heard of such a person.

"Yes, his elder brother, Stephen."

"I really think I must plead ignorance for Mr. Ashburnham never spoke to me about him."

"He is dead now, I believe?" and as he spoke the effect of the brandy which he had taken caused him to look at the other in a rather strange way.

The look—which the cautious Weathercroft would never have indulged in if he had not been under the influence of the potent brandy—at once gave the wily Dusky Detective a clew.

"Aha," he muttered to himself, "the wind sits in that quarter, eh?"

"He suspects that I am Stephen Ashburnham, and he fancied that the brandy would loosen my tongue so that I would be weak enough to let fall some unguarded expression, but instead of his gaining any information by means of this interview it is I who have profited by it."

"Yes, yes, I believe he is dead," the confidential man of business observed in a maudlin sort of way.

Tripoli filled his glass and pushed the bottle toward Weathercroft who only took a small quantity, for he feared that if he drank much more of the potent liquor he surely would make a fool of himself.

"Dead, is he?" quoth the Dusky Detective, "let us drink to his memory then and peace to his ashes."

The toast was duly drank, and then Tripoli rose to retire. Weathercroft accompanied him clear to the door of his room, and parted with him in the most friendly manner, but when the confidential man of business

returned to his own apartment he cried with a scowl:

"This man is a devil. I must kill him or he will bring me to the scaffold!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

NOCTURNAL INTRUDERS.

THE apartment to which Mr. Tripoli had been assigned was one of the oddest in the house, old-fashioned and odd as were all the rooms, excepting those which had been remodeled by Reginald Ashburnham's father after he purchased the property.

It was for all the world like one of the apartments sacred to ancestral ghosts such as we read about in the old-time legends.

The Dusky Detective had examined the apartment in the most careful manner after taking possession of it for the old-fashioned looking room with its heavy wainscoting suggested secret doors, concealed closets and hidden stairways, but the inspection of the searcher after knowledge did not produce the secrets anticipated.

If there were secret doors in the walls they were so cunningly contrived as to defy discovery.

Tripoli lit the gas—the mansion, though remote from a populous town, was supplied with the universal illuminator by means of a private gas machine—and then began to prepare to retire for the night.

"I flatter myself that my wily friend did not succeed in gaining much information from me," he soliloquized, as he slowly proceeded to disrobe.

"But I, on the contrary, have managed to ascertain one important fact."

"I am suspected, and I guess the nature of the suspicion."

"Decidedly then, so far, I have the best of it. This Weathercroft is an old hand, and a man such as he is cannot be easily trapped; but he has been so successful up to this point in the big game which he has been playing that success may have rendered him less cautious, and if he makes a single mistake, I feel sure I will have him on the hip."

"How lucky it was that fate sent me back across the wide ocean in time to save this beautiful and innocent girl from the snares which threaten to ruin all her young life!"

"She shall be saved from the pitfalls that surround her, amid which she walks in blissful ignorance of the perils that encompass every footstep."

"I was wise to yield to the presentiment that I was needed here, and surely it was naught but the hand of Heaven which sent me to this spot at such an opportune moment."

By this time he was ready for his couch, and after seeing that the doors and windows were securely fastened, he turned the gas down quite low and went to bed.

A life of constant travel and adventure had made it a second nature for him to examine all the surroundings in a strange place, as though he dreaded that an attack might be made upon him in his sleep.

Although no sign of the effect of the brandy which he had quaffed so liberally could be perceived upon him outwardly, yet still the powerful liquor had somewhat dulled his senses, so that he had not been five minutes in bed before he was securely wrapped in the embrace of the god of slumber.

There was an odd little French clock upon the mantle-piece which ticked away merrily, and, in delicate silver tones, proclaimed the hours as the fleeting minutes passed.

The sweet-toned bell rung out twelve just as Tripoli turned down the gas.

Away sped the minutes. One o'clock sounded, then two, and then three.

Hardly had the last sound of the bell died away on the air, when, noiselessly, a square yard of the floor, right by the side of the bed, slid out of sight, dropping an inch or so at one end and then sliding under the other part of the flooring.

It was a mechanical trap-door constructed after the most approved fashion.

Underneath it a narrow flight of stairs, barely two feet wide, led down into the darkness beneath.

The secret passage was ingeniously constructed between two walls, appertaining to adjoining rooms on the floor below, descending between two closets and so cunningly constructed that the most careful search

would never have succeeded in discovering its existence.

Through this narrow passage, into the room of the sleeper, ascended two men, plainly dressed in rough dark suits and wearing black masks which completely concealed their features.

They came up the narrow stairway with stealthy tread, moving like two unquiet ghosts, doomed to walk the earth amid the glimpses of the moon.

Coming as they did from the utter darkness of the passageway, the feeble light of the gas afforded them ample illumination.

When they reached the level of the apartment they gazed cautiously around them for a moment and then turned their attention to the Dusky Detective.

"He's sleeping like a top," remarked the taller one of the two intruders.

"Yes, but that's no sign that we have any time to spare," replied the other. "Men of his stamp are apt to waken like a flash, and so we must put in our work as quickly as possible."

"Got your tools all ready?"

"Ready they are, governor; I'm up and dressed for business."

"To work then!"

From his pocket the tall man produced a sponge, about as big as one's fist, and a small two ounce vial, closely corked.

He removed the stopper and a peculiar pungent odor immediately arose on the air.

With a careful hand he poured a liberal quantity of the contents of the vial upon the sponge and then applied the sponge to the nostrils of the sleeping man.

This unusual proceeding awoke Tripoli immediately and he stretched out his hands to grapple with the intruders.

The midnight assailants though were on their guard against just such a movement and were fully prepared for it.

The tall man placed his knee upon the chest of the recumbent Tripoli, and grasped him by the throat with one hand, clutching with a vise like grip, while with the other he pressed the sponge to his nostrils.

His companion springing to the head of the bed, grabbed the extended arms and pinned them securely.

"Tripoli struggled like an enraged lion for a few moments, and his assailants were taxed to the utmost of their powers to prevent him from escaping from their grasp.

The advantage of position, though, was with them, and then, too, the powerful drug which had been so deftly administered soon began to take effect.

And as the narcotic acted upon the senses the struggles of the assailed man became less and less severe, and finally he lay helpless in the power of his foes.

The two drew a long breath when they realized that the struggle was over.

"He's a hummer, now I tell you!" the tall fellow exclaimed; he was almost breathless and bathed in perspiration from the effects of the terrible exertions which he had been obliged to put forth.

"Yes; we should not have stood much chance with him if we had not taken him by surprise."

"Not much!" observed the other, decidedly. "In fact, I think it would have been safe to bet that he would have laid us both out if we hadn't gone for him the way we did."

"Shoulder him, for there isn't any time to lose," commanded the other, who was evidently the chief of the two.

The tall man raised the form of the senseless man in his arms and attempted to put it over his shoulder, but the effort was beyond his strength, and he was compelled to call upon his companion for aid.

"It's no go, governor," he said. "This fellow is all bone and muscle, and feels as if he weighed about a ton."

"You'll have to give me a hand, or else I'll never be able to get him down the stairs."

"Hang me if he ain't worse than a bullock to carry."

"Wait until I make his clothes up in a bundle," the other replied.

"His mysterious disappearance must be accounted for in some reasonable way. I don't want any more detectives prowling around the premises, although there is never much danger of their discovering anything,

for, as a rule, they are a miserable set of blunderheads.

"By removing the clothes we give the impression that he has departed voluntarily, and as no one in the house is familiar with his handwriting, it will be perfectly easy for me to scrawl a line in a disguised hand and leave it on the table here, saying that he had forgotten an important business matter which must be attended to immediately, and was compelled to depart without having time to bid adieu, but would soon return, and trusted that his abrupt departure without going through the ceremony of taking leave would be pardoned under the circumstances."

"Upon my word, it is a big head that you have!" exclaimed the tall man, in admiration, while the other began to gather the clothes of the sleeper together.

"I think the scheme will work all right. There isn't any one in the place who is particularly interested in this intruder and likely to take pains to inquire after him and then the note will be certain to make every one think that everything is all right."

"Yes, yes, no doubt about that."

"You see the strong point is, no one in the house has ever seen his handwriting and when the note is found in this room, signed by his name, what reason will any one have to suspect that aught is wrong?"

"No reason at all!" promptly replied the other. "This fellow is a sort of an odd fish, anyway, just the kind of a man to take the whim into his head to depart in the middle of the night and without saying a word to any one, so I think the plan will work to perfection."

By this time the speaker had gathered up all the wearing apparel of Tripoli and made them into a bundle.

Then the two carried the helpless man down the narrow stairs.

Down the long stairway they went bearing their heavy burden and they did not pause until they reached the cellar.

A dark lantern placed upon the floor of the cellar at the foot of the stairs afforded them light.

After descending some eight steps the chief man of the two had pressed a secret spring in the wall which operated the trap-door, causing it to close as noiselessly as it had opened.

The underground apartment to which the secret stairway led was not the regular cellar of the mansion but an ingeniously constructed vault in the rear of the house-cellar, access to which could be had by way of a secret door in the main cellar, or by the hidden staircase.

Raven Towers was a mansion full of mysteries, and it was little wonder that it was looked upon distrustfully by all who were acquainted with the history of the gloomy pile.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN THE VAULT.

"WHAT'S the programme now, governor?" the tall fellow asked, when they came to the foot of the stairs and the leader relinquished his hold on the victim in order to pick up the lantern.

"To lock this fellow up for a while until we secure the plunder that we are after."

"Why not make an end of it now?" and the other with a ferocious gesture indicated the cutting of a throat.

"Oh, no, there isn't really any absolute necessity for proceeding to extremities, and to shed blood unless it is a question of life or death is one of the worst of blunders."

"My purpose will be served equally well by locking this intruder up until the game is ended and the prize is won."

"There's a small cell at the end of this vault and we can put him there and keep him until all danger of detection is over."

"How about his fodder?" the tall fellow asked, with a grin.

"There's a small dumb-waiter which runs from my room up-stairs to the cell, and by its means I can easily send him down food enough to support life."

"Why, this thing is about as convenient as though it was contrived expressly for such a scheme."

"And so it was. My grandfather did the mason-work here a good hundred years ago."

"He made a fortune out of the job, and

was able to return to England and open a public-house, but as he was his own best customer, he never made more than a living out of the place, and when old age came on he was obliged to give it up; he found shelter with my father, who was a tradesman in a small way, and in the long winter nights he used to amuse me—a child playing around his knee—with the story of the wonderful secret vaults which he built here. And he also did the carpenter-work of the secret stairways; there are three of them in the house."

"A regular house of mysteries, eh?" the other observed.

"Yes. Boy-like, of course I listened with a greedy ear to the old man's tales, never dreaming, though, that I would ever see the house."

"But when I came to live here, it did not take me long to discover that I was an inmate of a house of which I knew more than any living man."

"With my grandfather's stories still fresh in my memory, when I heard the old legends of Raven Towers it was not difficult for me to get at the truth of the matter."

"Well, from what I have heard, it seems to me like a mightily mixed affair."

"Oh, no, not when you come to look into it."

"Old Raven, who built the house, was obliged to fly from England and seek refuge in this country."

"Just exactly what crime the man committed is a mystery, but it was serious enough to cause him to fly as if for his life, and to make him dread pursuit and capture."

"Particularly was he on his guard against secret enemies who, under the garb of friendship, might worm themselves into his house and confidence, and it was for their especial accommodation that these secret cells were constructed."

"The vault was intended to serve as a place of refuge for him in case his enemies pressed him closely, and in the cells he intended to thrust any foe whom he might discover in his house."

"He was a long-headed old rascal," the other remarked.

"Yes, he was shrewd enough in some respects, but when you come to look closely into the matter it is easy to perceive that the man wasn't right in his head."

"A little cracked in the upper story?"

"Oh, yes, no doubt about it, or else he never would have acted as he did."

"But as it is, his madness about secret hiding places comes in well for us."

"Yes, yes, come on and I will light the way."

A stout wooden door guarded the entrance to the cell. A massive lock confined the door.

"I took an impression and had a key made to fit," the leader explained as he unlocked the door.

"When this fellow made his appearance I took his measure almost immediately, and came to the conclusion that he would turn out to be an ugly customer, and so began to plan how to get rid of him as easily as possible."

"You didn't start a minute too quick," the other remarked.

"I believe you are right about that."

Then the door swung on its hinges and the tall ruffian dragged the helpless victim into the cell, the other proceeding in advance to light the way.

"Why this 'ere is like a tomb," the bearer of the insensible man remarked with a shudder, as he deposited his burden on a bundle of damp, moldy-smelling straw which was in a corner of the apartment.

"Hang me if I don't believe I would rather be killed outright than shut up in such a place as this 'ere," he continued as he surveyed the gloomy apartment.

"I incline to the opinion that the parties who have enjoyed the hospitalities of this place were never consulted in regard to what they liked or didn't like," the other responded, dryly.

"It answers the purpose for which it was intended admirably, and it will hold our bird as securely as though we had placed him in an iron cage."

"S'pose he dies in this 'ere place?" the tall ruffian queried.

"Blame me if I don't think that a couple of days in this tomb would drive me raving mad, and I would be just as apt to butt my head agin' the walls as not."

"Well, that isn't my lookout, you know," the other replied, with a shrug of his shoulders.

"If he dies, he dies, and that is all there is to it. It isn't my fault. I shall leave him alive and well, and if he is fool enough to make a die of it, why, it's no concern of mine."

"Right you are, governor, you don't murder the man, of course, but I think the 'beaks' that boss the law would be mighty apt to make it warm for you if they diskivered the trick."

"Yes, yes, no doubt, but we must work things so carefully that it will not be discovered."

"This place ought to hold a secret as securely as a tomb, and if it does we may laugh at the law and the dull-eyed dolts who are chosen to execute it. But come along! We must be out of this before the effect of the drug passes away."

"Go ahead, governor."

The two quitted the cell, taking particular care to fasten the door securely after them.

Then by the secret stairway they ascended to the upper regions.

For fully twenty minutes after their departure the victim remained perfectly quiet, and it really seemed as if they had killed the man instead of simply dulling his senses.

But the master-villain, who had planned the nocturnal attack was a skilled hand at such business, and had not blundered in this instance.

The dose had been just enough to cause insensibility but not death.

Slowly the senses of the entrapped man returned to him.

"He gasped and sat upright, staring in a vacant sort of way around him."

Of course, in the utter darkness which reigned supreme within the narrow limits of the cell he was not able to distinguish a single object.

With the return of his senses had come remembrance of all that had taken place.

He understood that he had been attacked, and suspected he was not in his own apartment.

As soon as he was in full possession of his senses the damp noisome air of the underground apartment suggested to him that he was below the level of the ground.

Mechanically he extended his hands, and one of them touched the bundle of clothes which his assailants had been careful to bring.

"Hello! what's this?" he murmured.

But upon examination he soon discovered of what the bundle consisted.

"A suit of clothes, complete even to shoes and stockings," he observed.

"Well, it is plainly evident that the scoundrels who committed this outrage did not intend I should perish by exposure to the chill of this damp, disagreeable hole," continued the victim. "If I can judge by the sense of touch, it is my own clothes, and if so, there is a box of wax matches in one of the pockets, thanks to my love for smoking."

The matches were soon found and one ignited.

And as soon as the blaze illuminated the apartment Tripoli realized what had occurred to him.

"The scoundrel suspects that I am on his track, and by this desperate blow seeks to remove me from it and stifle all investigation."

"Will he succeed in his design?"

"That is a question which time alone can answer."

"There isn't the least doubt that he has scored a point by the success of this midnight assault, and that as long as he can keep me a prisoner here, he is safe from danger."

By this time the match was about burnt out, and Tripoli made haste to light another, and placing this upon the ground, he proceeded to dress with all possible haste, and when this task was accomplished—the match came to an end, of course, long before it was finished, but being used to dressing in the dark, it did not make any particular difference—the prisoner proceeded to look around him for the purpose of ascertaining if there

was not a chance to make his escape from the prison-house.

Again the matches came in play, and by their aid Tripoli ascertained that he was in an underground apartment about ten feet square.

Walls, floor and ceiling were composed of solid masonry, and the small door at the end of the apartment, the only break in the solid stones, visible above, below, or in the floor walls, was made of oak plank, massive enough, apparently, to resist anything short of a cannon-ball.

The story that the chief villain had told relative to a dumb-waiter, by means of which food was to be supplied to the prisoner, was a fiction, pure and simple.

The prisoner was thrust into the dungeon, to die of thirst and starvation, enduring the pangs of a thousand deaths all in one.

"By Jove!" exclaimed the captive, after he had finished his inspection, "I am shut up here like a rat in a trap!"

CHAPTER XX.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

Not a single avenue of escape seemed open to him; a miracle alone, seemingly, could save him from the awful death to which he had been doomed by the man who had so ably planned and carried out the nocturnal attack.

And miracles in these degenerate modern days are not as common as they were in the olden time, that is, if we credit the old-time tales of the mighty deeds the ancient sages and wizards performed.

Yet, as the Dusky Detective stood and glared around him in the darkness, fully realizing the peril of his position, and fully understanding that if he did not find some way to escape from this fearful underground cell, death would surely overtake him before many hours, his indomitable courage never forsook him.

"I was hot on a scent," he mused.

"There isn't the least doubt about it. I was on the track of the right man, and in his desperation he determined to silence me as soon as possible."

"My suspicion was correct; there has been murder most foul committed, and in some mysterious way the doer of the deed suspected that I was on the track of the murderer; violent measures were necessary and he did not hesitate at a second murder to conceal the first."

"But I am not dead yet and while there is life there is hope."

Hardly had the word left his lips when a peculiar scratching sound came to his ears.

He listened intently.

Was it the nocturnal intruders who had made him captive with so little ceremony returning to complete their work—to make a bloody ending to the affair by putting their captive to death?

Yet upon second thoughts this did not seem probable, for the assailants if they intended to make a tragedy out of the affair most certainly would not have been apt to allow the captive to recover from the effect of the powerful drug which had lulled his senses to forgetfulness.

As he was puzzling his head over the strange noise, suddenly a bright ray of light streamed into the apartment, striking the prisoner full in the face.

A secret door in the apparently solid stone wall of the dungeon cell had opened and in the doorway stood Paddy, the Gossoon, with a bull's-eye lantern in his hand.

"Glory be to all the saints, ye'r' alive!" the Irishman cried, while his honest face was illuminated by a broad grin.

"Yes, I am alive, and thanks to your timely appearance I stand a chance to remain so, but, I confess, I had about come to the opinion I stood a good chance to end my days in this miserable place."

"Oh, no, yer honor, there's a long life before yees, and I shall be afther living to see yees get the better of yer innimies, bad cess to the blaggards!"

And the expression upon the face of the Irishman clearly proved that the words came straight from his heart.

Tripoli caught eagerly at the speech for it seemed to imply that Paddy was acquainted with the men who had sought to kill him.

"You know then that I have enemies?" he exclaimed.

"Shure an' I do, the murtherin' thaves of the world!"

"Who are they?"

"Upon me wourd, ye'r' too much for me, sur," the Irishman replied, with a shake of the head.

"There was two of thim to the fore, but as they had their faces hid wid masks it's not for the likes of me for to say who the blaggards were."

The speech surprised Tripoli for it conveyed to him the intelligence that Paddy was acquainted with the particulars of the nocturnal assault upon him which had resulted in his being conveyed to this gloomy tomb-like apartment.

"Ah! you are aware, then, of the attack upon me? And yet, I cannot understand how that can be, since it took place in the privacy of my apartment. And it is a mystery, too, how the scoundrels managed to get at me, as I was careful to see that all means of ingress to the room was securely barred before I went to bed."

"Faith, yer honor, the blaggards got at yees by manes of a trap-door in the flure," the Irishman replied.

"That explains the puzzle, then; but how comes it that you know all about the matter?" questioned Tripoli, who could not at all understand the riddle.

"Shure, yer honor, I've tried me best to kape me eyes on yees, day an' night, iver since ye kem back. I was afther knowing ye the moment I set me two eyes on ye, an' I was shure that there was thim in the house that would be afther making yer honor trouble if they could."

"Well, after this little surprise-party that has taken place to-night, there isn't much doubt in my mind that your surmise is quite correct; and now the next point to be ascertained is who are the parties who look upon me in the light of a man who threatens to prove so dangerous that he must be got out of the way as speedily as possible."

The Irishman shook his head, and a vacant look appeared upon his face.

"You can't put your finger on the parties?"

"Indade an' I can't."

"But why should you suspect that danger threatened me then, if you are unable to point out my enemies?" Tripoli asked, considerably astonished by the odd circumstance.

"Shure, yer honor, didn't ye come to the house under a false name, an' wasn't that a token ye dreaded danger whin ye had a right to walk in as the master, more power to ye?" replied Paddy, with true Hibernian shrewdness.

"An' thin, hasn't it been the bitter bad luck that has followed the ould family iver since they kem to this devil's house?"

And honest Paddy shook his head sorrowfully as he reflected upon the dire events which had occurred since the Ashburnhams took up their residence in the ill-omened mansion known as Raven Towers.

And now that the explanation had been given, the Dusky Detective understood that Paddy the Gossoon had acted more with the instinct of the faithful dog than with the intelligence of the human.

"Yis, yer honor," continued the Irishman, "when ye kem here under a false name, I knew that ye was afeard of danger, an' I made up me mind to kape me eyes wide open, and to-night whin I wint to bed I couldn't slape for dreaming of mischief, so I got up an' dressed meself, an' thin I stretched meself out in the entry in front of yer dure, an' as there's a big crack under the dure, I could see into the room, an' so I saw the blaggards kem up through the flure."

"But how was it that you happened to know about this place and why did you suspect that I would be carried down here?" Tripoli asked.

"Well, yer honor, whin I saw the blaggards carry you down the trap-dure it kem to me all of a sudden that they would be afther lugging yez to this place."

"You see, yer honor, it was jist by accident that I diskivered this weeney room."

"'Twas only last week, yer honor, that I was on the hunt for eysters at low tide under the weeney dock at the riverside, an' as I was afther putting my hand on wan of the stones jist under the flure of the dock I felt it move, jist easy-like, you know, for all the

would like a dure, an' it was a weeney dure as I'm a sinner!

"Then, yer honor, I thought of all the stories that I've heerd since I kem to live in this devil's den, 'bout how there were say-cret passages, an' all sich things, under the house, that nobody now in the would knew anything of, at all, at all."

"Such stories are common enough about ancient mansions in the old country, but it is not often in the New World that a pile venerable enough to give rise to legends of this sort is encountered," Tripoli observed.

"Oh, yer honor, the stories that they do be afther telling is enough to make the hair of a dacent man stand on ind wid horror."

"I don't doubt it in the least."

"I was always a curious baste, an' whin I found that there was a bit of a stone dure under the dock, not the l'aste taste of a wound did I say to anybody, but I wint an' got me a lantern an' then I tried fer to see what was the m'aning of the thing."

"Beyand the dure was a weeney way, jist about big enough for a man to walk troo and I wint along it until I kem to this dure here," and Paddy pointed to the one through which he had come.

"It's not aisy to see it on this side, yer honor, but it's as plain to the eye on the other side as the nose on yer honor's face by r'ason of the big bolts."

"And did you succeed in penetrating further than this room?"

"No, yer honor, I tried the dure yonder but divil a hair could I budge it."

"And so when you saw me carried through the floor, you came to the conclusion that in this terrible hole I might be found?"

"Yis, yer honor; bedad it's a foine head ye have to be afther coming at the p'int so nately."

"It is evident that the fellows who put me here had no idea of this secret passage leading to the riverside or else they would have taken measures to prevent any one from gaining access to this cell in that direction," Tripoli observed, as he reflected carefully over the matter.

"It is lucky for me that such is the case for if it had been otherwise death most surely would have been my fate."

"I owe my life to you and I shall not forget the service."

"Don't mention it, yer honor!" the Irishman exclaimed.

"Indade I'd do more than that fer yer honor if I could, an' all for the glory of the old stock!"

Tripoli comprehended that he had an enthusiast to deal with and so forbore to press the matter.

"Now then, the first thing to be done is to get out of this and then we'll do our best to get on the track of the scoundrels."

"It will be a rare surprise to them when they come to look for their victim to discover that he is among the missing and unless they succeed in discovering the secret of the passage to the riverside they will be unable to account for my mysterious disappearance."

"Shure, yer honor, the blaggard will be apt to think that ye'r' like a ghost, able to walk troo stone walls as aisy as you pl'ase," and Paddy grinned at the conceit.

"They will be mystified of course and before they have a chance to recover from their surprise I may be able to catch them on the hip for I have a suspicion that there has been foul murder done."

"I cannot divest myself of the belief that both Reginald Ashburnham and his wife were unfairly dealt with."

"About Reginald himself I am not so certain, for his death may have been due to natural causes, but the lady I am sure was decoyed away and murdered, and the more I reflect upon the matter the more certain I feel about it and I have sworn to never rest until I have avenged the murder."

"I'm wid ye, yer honor, to the last gasp!" Paddy declared.

"Shure, I knew the minute I set me two eyes on ye that ye'd kem back for to straighten things out, an' crooked enough they are too."

"Come, we must be going!" Tripoli declared.

CHAPTER XXI.

ON THE TRACK.

As it happened to be low tide the two men made their way without difficulty from the secret passage.

If the tide had been high they would have had to wade through some four feet of water as at high tide the river came within a foot of the secret den which led into the underground passage.

Paddy had a way of getting into and out of the house at all hours without exciting anybody's suspicions.

There was a small side door leading into the cellar of the house which being in an inconvenient position had been abandoned, and a new one constructed.

To the lock of the old door the Irishman had fitted a key and so without anybody suspecting it, was able to enter or leave the house unobserved at all hours.

When they were within the cellar Tripoli halted to hold a council of war, as he jocose-ly termed it.

"If there were not obstacles in the way," he remarked, "the best course for us to pursue would be to go up-stairs to my room, seek for the trap door through which the scoundrels carried me, and then descend by means of the secret passage under the trap-door to the cellar, which is evidently in the rear of this one."

"True for yees, yer honor," the Irishman observed, with a sagacious nod.

"But the obstacles in the way, to which I referred, prevent us from going ahead in that direction."

"My door is both locked and bolted on the inside, and as it is a pretty solid piece of wood, entrance could not be forced without making noise enough to wake up everybody in the house."

"Yis, yis, and that wouldn't do."

"Certainly not; our game is to work in the dark at present."

"Now, to my thinking, the chances are great that there is some means of communication between this cellar and the secret apartment, which must be right in the rear of us, and we ought to be able to discover the way to get into it."

"Yis, yis, shure an' we ought!"

"Let us get to work, then, and examine every inch of the wall."

Carefully they searched for the secret door, and at last, just as they were on the point of giving up the task in despair, they hit upon it.

A moment later they stood within the secret vault, which was, as Tripoli had suspected, directly in the rear of the regular cellar attached to the mansion.

It was a good sized apartment, about thirty feet wide by forty long, and at the further end were two massive doors which, upon examination, were found to be securely locked.

A careful inspection also revealed a secret door in the stone wall, situated between the two visible portals, and Tripoli being lucky enough to find the spring which fastened the door, was able to open it. As he had expected, the secret stairway leading to the upper part of the house was revealed.

"This is the passage, evidently, that leads to the trap-door in my room, and by means of which I was conveyed to the cell from which you rescued me," the Dusky Detective remarked.

"Thanks to this passage, I shall be able to get to my apartment again, and when I make my appearance, in the morning, which I shall do as unconcerned as though nothing out of the common run had occurred during the night, the man, or men, responsible for the outrage will be so surprised that the chances are great I will be able to detect them at once."

"Yis, yer houor, and thin ye kin break their dirthy backs, bad 'cess to 'em!" cried Paddy.

"But now let us examine the vault further, and see if we can discover anything more," observed the gentleman.

It was evident that some one had been in the habit of making use of the apartment, for there was a table and a couple of stools in the middle of it, and on one end of the table was some tobacco ashes, as though a smoker had rested a lighted cigar or a pipe upon it.

"This shows signs of human presence," Tripoli observed, as he called the Irishman's attention to the ashes.

"Yis, sur."

And then the Dusky Detective perceived a pit in the further end of the apartment and immediately proceeded to examine it.

"What have we here?" he exclaimed, as he hastened to the spot and glared down into the darkness.

"It 'u'd be afther looking like a well, sur," Paddy remarked.

"Strange place for any one to dig a well," Tripoli observed.

"Shure an' it is, yer honor, but it's a strange ould house, anyhow," the Irishman replied.

"You are right, there, Paddy, and the more we examine it the stranger it appears."

"Flash the light of your lantern down this mysterious hole and let me see what we can make of it."

Paddy obeyed, and the Dusky Detective, bending low, peered into the darkness.

The tide was low, so there wasn't any water in the pit.

This was the same cavity which was the scene of the tragedy disclosed in one of the early chapters in this strange tale of ours.

"It is not a well, for there isn't any water in it, and—"

"Great heavens! I believe I can distinguish the body of a man at the bottom!"

The Irishman uttered a cry of horror.

"Is that true, yer honor?" he cried.

"It certainly looks like it, and perhaps we are on the track of a great crime."

CHAPTER XXII.

A VOICE FROM THE GRAVE.

"It will be a difficult matter for us to get at the body, but in some way we must accomplish the task," the Dusky Detective remarked, as he gazed down upon the dark, misshapen mass at the bottom of the pit, which he strongly suspected to be the body of a man.

"The pit is about eight feet deep, I think," Tripoli continued, as he measured the distance with his eye.

"Yer honor, I think I can manage it!" Paddy exclaimed.

"It's a foine b'ye I am for climbing, an' sich tricks."

"I can 'asily drop to the bottom, thin if yer honor will hand me the stools, by putting one on the other, I'll go bail I kin rise ag'in wid the help of yer honor's hand."

"Capital, Paddy!" Tripoli replied. "It's plain that you have a head on your shoulders worth something."

"Let's get at it at once, for the night is waning fast."

The Irishman's boast had not been an idle one for from early early boyhood he had been expert at all kinds of muscular exercises, and it was not difficult for him to drop to the bottom of the pit after suspending himself at full length from the top.

The soft ground at the bottom broke the force of the fall and Paddy landed upon his feet as nimbly as a cat.

The Dusky Detective had taken the lantern from him when he prepared to descend and now that he had gained the bottom of the pit dropped it into his outstretched hands.

The Irishman caught it with the ease of a veteran ball-tosser and then proceeded to examine the shapeless mass, all huddled together at one side of the pit.

"'Twas a man, yer honor, shure enough, but there's nothin' left now at all, at all, but rags and bones."

It was the truth. The moment Paddy laid his hand upon the mass it crumbled under his touch.

"There's a broken knife, yer honor, sticking in the mud, an' in the rags something that looks like a weeney book."

"Aha, that is a treasure worth securing!" exclaimed Tripoli, eagerly.

"Take possession of it by all means, and also take the knife for the articles will in all probability lead to the identification of the body."

"Yis, yer honor, I don't know exactly phat ye mane, but av course yer honor does, so it's all right," the Irishman observed, puzzled by the big word.

"I mean that the knife and the book will probably be recognized by somebody, and then we will find out who the man is who came to so dreadful a death, for there isn't much doubt that there was something wrong about this business, and I think the chances

are at least a hundred to one that there has been foul play here; the man was murdered and then the body thrown into this pit so that all traces of the crime might be destroyed."

"Shure, yer honor, it looks like it."

"Look careful so as to be sure that there isn't anything else. We musn't leave a single article behind likely to lead to the identification of the body."

The Irishman was a stout-hearted fellow and so he didn't mind disturbing the remains of the unfortunate wretch whose bones had been consigned to so strange a grave.

But a single article rewarded the search and this was a large wallet which seemed to be full of money.

"All right, come up and we'll see what we can make of the matter," the Dusky Detective remarked, when this discovery was made known to him.

By the aid of the stools and the outstretched hands of Tripoli, Paddy managed to climb out of the pit.

The Dusky Detective wrapped the articles which he had found amid the bones, up in his handkerchief.

"Now, by means of the secret stairway we can easily gain access to my room, without any one in the house being the wiser for it," Tripoli remarked.

"And then in the morning when I make my appearance as usual, and just as if nothing out of the common had occurred during the night, the villain who planned the attack upon me will be so taken by surprise that there is hardly a doubt I will be able to see the signs of guilt in his face."

"True for you, sur!" exclaimed Paddy, emphatically.

"Shure, ye'll be able to put yer finger on the dirty blaggard in a minute, bad 'cess to him!"

"Yes, unless he is one of the most accomplished scoundrels in the world."

"I have my suspicions in regard to who he is, and I think I can give a shrewd guess as to who the unfortunate man was whose bones we have stumbled on to-night."

"I know more of these terrible shadows which have fallen upon Raven Towers than any one suspects."

"By accident I obtained a clew to the dark mystery within a few hours after I landed in New York, and it was with the full determination to probe the strange affair to its deepest depths that I came to this mansion and schemed to become one of its inmates, passing under a false name so that the guilty wretch, the author of all this awful work, would not be able to discover that an avenger was on his track."

"The fate of your mistress, the unfortunate Winifred, wife of Reginald Ashburnham, I already know."

"Is that so, yer honor?" asked Paddy, eagerly.

"Yes; she is dead, hapless girl! But how she came to her death is still a mystery to me, although I am aware of the manner of it."

"I was shure she was dead. She was a good mistress, Heaven rest her soul!" exclaimed the Irishman, piously.

"And I will avenge her death in the most complete and terrible manner. But now, let's be off, and when we are safe in my apartment, we can examine these relics of the dead and see if we can gain any clew to the identity of the owner."

By means of the secret stairway—so cunningly constructed between the partition walls of the mansion that its existence, unless an especial search was made for it, would never be suspected—the two ascended to Tripoli's apartment.

"I can understand, now, why this room was assigned to me," the Dusky Detective remarked.

"It is evident that my mission of vengeance was suspected from the moment that I succeeded in making arrangements to take up my quarters in Raven Towers, and it was immediately determined that I should be put out of the way as quickly as possible."

"And although success at first seemed to crown the plans of this dark villain, who sits, spider like, and spins his web in Raven Towers, now, thanks to your timely arrival, and the important discovery we made, I think the chances are good that the avenging hand of justice will soon have the guilty

scoundrel by the throat and then, and not until then, will I rest satisfied."

"Shure, yer honor will be afther putting the hangman's rope round the spalpeen's neck, bad 'cess to him, the murdering thafe of the wourld!" declared the Irishman with honest warmth.

"Now the first thing to be done is to secure this trap so that no more unexpected visitors can take me by surprise."

It was an easy task for the two strong men to move the bed so that one of the massive posts rested directly on the trap.

It would have required the strength of one of the fabled giants of old to have moved the trap-door with the heavy weight resting full upon it.

"Look that all the window curtains are tightly closed, so that we can turn up the light without betraying to any one on the outside that we are at work here," the Dusky Detective observed.

"At the present moment my foe supposes that I am at his mercy in the underground cell to which I was consigned, and he must not know of my escape until I unexpectedly confront him to-morrow morning, and if he does not betray his guilt then he is a master scoundrel indeed."

"Shure, there do be small doubt as to that, sur!" Paddy asserted, as he carefully examined all the windows and made sure that the curtains were tightly drawn.

The window draperies were composed of heavy stuff, so close in texture that not a single ray of light could penetrate through them.

"It's all right, sur, not a weeney bit of light can be afther getting to the outside," Paddy observed.

"Up goes the gas, then."

And with the word the gas was turned on and a flood of light illuminated the apartment.

"Aha, the key-hole!" suddenly cried Tripoli, "I did not think of that."

"Some of these odd-mannered gentlemen, who did me the honor to call upon me without an invitation, may be prowling through the entry and a ray of light streaming through the key-hole would be certain to attract attention."

"I'll put me cap on the kay and that will hide the key-hole," said the Irishman and he immediately proceeded so to do.

"Help yourself to a chair and we'll see if we can get to the bottom of this strange mystery," remarked Tripoli as he seated himself by the side of the gas.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE CONFESSION.

"THIS really seems like one of the miracles that we used to read about," Tripoli remarked as he proceeded to examine the memorandum-book.

"Yis, sur, it does," the Irishman assented.

"That the unfortunate wretch whose bones we found in the pit came to his death by foul means I do not for a moment doubt."

"And the man or men who murdered him and hid the remains away so carefully probably chuckled at their shrewdness in disposing of the body and they flattered themselves that until the day of judgment no trace would be discovered of the missing man."

"Yis, yer honor, and if it hadn't been for our finding the bones, jist by accident, no man would have known anything about it."

"The hand of Heaven evidently is in this matter," the Dusky Detective remarked. "The hiding away of the body in the obscure hole was a stroke of genius but as is usual in such cases, the guilty party neglected one important point."

"The body should have been searched before being consigned to the pit and all articles removed which might lead to the identification of the remains."

"If this had been done it would be impossible for any one to find a clew to the mystery, for the clothing being destroyed the remains could not be identified."

"But as it is, the knife is an important clew and this memorandum-book a more important one still, for it is almost certain that there is some writing in it by means of which the name of the owner can be discovered."

"Mebbe the water will have been afther washing it away, sur," the Irishman suggested.

"I think the chances are greater that the

writing will be sufficiently well-preserved to allow it to be easily read," Tripoli replied.

"The book appears to be a well-made one, a good outside cover and strongly bound and the leaves being pressed tightly together, must have rendered it almost waterproof."

"I have known of cases where books of this kind have been under water for a long time too and then been recovered comparatively uninjured."

"Shure, that's wonderful, sur!"

"I'll soon ascertain how it is in this case," and then the Dusky Detective proceeded to open the book.

As he had stated, it was an extremely well-made book, good strong paper and finely bound in the best Turkey morocco, and as the leaves had been tightly pressed together, the water had only caused the ink on the pages to run a little so that the writing could be easily deciphered.

The first ten pages were blank and then the writing began—in a bold, free hand, easily read.

Hardly had the Dusky Detective cast his eyes over the first few pages when an exclamation of surprise broke from his lips.

"Great heavens! this is indeed a most important discovery!" he cried.

Paddy became all ears.

"What was the name of the gardener who disappeared at the same time as Mrs. Ashburnham, and whom the detectives believed to have taken the lady away with him?"

"Bridges, yer honor, Clement Bridges."

"This is his book; here is his name inscribed on a page," and Tripoli held the book up for the other's inspection.

True enough, on the title page of the memorandum-book was the inscription:

"CLEMENT BRIDGES,
Gardener,
Raven Towers,
Hastings-on-Hudson,
N. Y."

"That's him—that's his fist!" exclaimed the Irishman, excitedly.

"I'd go bail on that anywhere. It's proud he was of the foine handwriting that he had to the fore, and many's the time I've seen him write his name wid a foine flourish, and dare any of the b'yes for to write a fist like it."

"This is his book, then, beyond a doubt, and the mystery in regard to the identity of the bones in the pit is solved."

"Those bones are the mortal remains of the man whose sudden disappearance was so great a mystery to every one."

"Clement Bridges did not fly in the night with Mrs. Ashburnham, as the astute detectives declared, but came to his death right here in Raven Towers, and then, to conceal all traces of the crime, the remains were deposited in this underground pit, the existence of which is not known, probably, to any one but the arch villain who committed the crime."

"And the mistress, sur, does yer honor think she was kilt, too?" Paddy asked, anxious grief visible in every line of his honest face.

"Her fate is known to me, though I am in the dark as to how she came to it," the Dusky Detective replied, sadly.

"And she's not alive?"

"No, I am sorry to say she is not; she has crossed the dark river, and is now at rest in her eternal home."

"Just by accident I discovered this fact only a few hours after I landed in New York, and it was to solve the dark mystery that surrounded her death that brought me under a false name to this house—this gloomy pile, which seems fated to bring calamity to all the unfortunate souls who are unlucky enough to dwell within its walls!"

"It's a tomb, yer honor!" declared the Irishman, earnestly.

"Shure, I tould his honor—the masher, ye know—that I didn't like the looks of the place the first toime I ever set me two eyes on it."

"It was a dark hour for Reginald Ashburnham when he entered Raven Towers," Tripoli remarked.

"But now for the book."

He turned over the leaves until he came to the pages upon which was the writing.

A bold head-line upon the first of these pages attracted his attention.

"The confession of Clement Bridges!" he read aloud.

"Aha!" exclaimed Paddy. "Shure yer honor's got hold of the tail of a rat there!"

"Yes, I've not the least doubt that in this confession I have a key that will unlock the whole mystery."

"I will read it over carefully for it is like a voice from the grave."

The Dusky Detective judged that it was best not to allow the Irishman to become acquainted with the full details of the confession, for although he had not the slightest doubt of his honesty he mistrusted his discretion, and was afraid that if he was put in full possession of all the facts he might inadvertently blurt out something which would be apt to put the guilty party on his guard and so give him an opportunity to make his escape before preparations could be made to apprehend him.

So he resolved to keep the full particulars of the confession to himself and only impart a small portion of it to the Irishman.

The written statement ran as follows:

"THE CONFESSION OF CLEMENT BRIDGES."

"As I have been doomed to an awful death, and am unable to see any chance of escape open to me, I desire to leave behind this statement so that a terrible crime may be brought to light and my murder also be avenged."

"My name is Clement Bridges, and I was the head gardener at Raven Towers, in the employ of Mr. Reginald Ashburnham."

"I am an Englishman by birth, but on account of falling into evil ways while quite a young man I have long been an exile from my native land."

"Since coming to America, too, I have been the associate of desperate, law-breaking men, and one of the reasons why I sought to get a place at Raven Towers was that I recognized in one of the inmates an old criminal from across the water."

"In England he was called Gypsy Wolf, and was reputed to be as desperate and dangerous a man as could be found in all England, although no one would have been apt from his appearance to take him to be a member of the dangerous class, as he looked more like a preacher than anything else."

"As far as I could find out he seemed to be acting on the square, but knowing the man so well I came to the conclusion that he was playing some deep game and that in the end he would make a big strike, and I wanted to have a share in it."

"I succeeded in getting a situation in Raven Towers, and soon gained the confidence of Gypsy Wolf for something seemed to whisper to him that I was a scoundrel after his own heart."

"After I had been about a month in the place Mr. Reginald Ashburnham suddenly sickened and died."

"I have an idea that he came to his death through foul play, and after I became on familiar terms with Gypsy Wolf, I one day took a favorable opportunity to suggest as much to him, but he denied that he had anything to do with the matter, but seized upon the chance to make known to me a plan which he had in his mind."

"And this was to abduct Mrs. Ashburnham. He was in possession of the fact that there were secret vaults under the house, and in one of the cells in the vaults he proposed to confine the lady until he could get his hands on all the portable valuables and then we could give leg-bail together."

"His plan was a shrewd one."

"It was Mrs. Ashburnham's habit to take a glass of milk every evening before going to bed."

"In this milk he introduced a powerful drug and in five minutes from the time the lady drank the milk she was insensible."

"Both Gypsy Wolf and myself were concealed in the room and when she became insensible, we came from our hiding places and conveyed her by means of a secret stairway to the cell in the vault which had been arranged for her reception."

"Then, in order to throw the detectives off the track, for of course an exhaustive search would be made, Gypsy Wolf, an expert in assuming all disguises, dressed himself in the lady's apparel and, accompanied by myself took a night train at the depot for New York."

"As it was a dark night and my companion took particular care to keep his heavy veil closely over his face the deception was not discovered by any one."

"The idea of this trick was to lead every one to suppose that Mrs. Ashburnham had fled in my company and it succeeded to perfection, for when the detectives were employed they secured what seemed to be undisputable evidence that the lady had gone to New York in my company."

"In New York after leaving the depot we found a secluded spot where Gypsy Wolf stripped off his disguise, having his own clothes on underneath, and I put on a wig and a false beard thus completely disguising myself, and then we took the late train back to Raven Towers again."

"We managed to gain entrance to the house without encountering any one. I went to the secret vault, for it had been arranged that I should act as the jailer of the lady while my confederate went about his business as usual, but a month passed in the vault sickened me and I came to the conclusion that I might as well be dead as to lead such a miserable life, and then a most unexpected event happened."

"It was the Gypsy Wolf's idea to keep Mrs. Ashburnham a prisoner until he could manage to get his hands on all the valuables which could be transferred into cash without any trouble, he having forged her name to a power of attorney for this express purpose, and then we were to leave."

"Of course it would take some time to do this, two or three months at the least and he had determined to keep Mrs. Ashburnham a prisoner until he was safely off with his booty and then I was by accident to discover an escape."

"This cunning scheme came to naught though,

for there was a secret passage leading from the cell to the river, of which neither the Gypsy Wolf nor myself had any knowledge, but the imprisoned woman managed to discover it, and when I went to give her her supper one night I discovered that she was gone."

"She had left the secret door open behind her, so it was apparent how she had escaped, but as the passageway led to the river and she had made her way through it in the darkness I thought that it was pretty certain she had only escaped from captivity to find a watery grave."

"But if she was alive I was in peril for she knew that I was her jailer, for the Gypsy Wolf had carefully kept himself in the background."

"So I determined not to say anything to him about the escape of the prisoner but to strike for a big stake and then get out."

"I tried the game, we quarreled, the Gypsy Wolf overpowered and cast me into this well-hole where, as the water is slowly rising around me it seems as though I was doomed to die a horrible death, and I write this confession with the hope that it may one day fall into the hands of some one able to bring this villain to justice, and so with my dying breath I declare the Gypsy Wolf, the man now known as Obadiah Weathercroft, to be the abductor of Mrs. Ashburnham, and my murderer."

Then followed the bold signature:

"CLEMENT BRIDGES."

The Irishman watched the face of Tripoli attentively as he closed the book.

"Is it any good, yer honor?" he asked.

"Yes, I think there is evidence enough here to hang this scoundrel," the other answered, as he put the book away carefully in his pocket.

"Good for yees!" exclaimed Paddy. "Shure the blaggard deserves to be kilt!"

"I must proceed slowly, so as to weave a web around him from which escape will not be possible; therefore, you must be careful not to reveal to any one what we have discovered to-night."

"Oh! I've me alone for to kape a still tongue in me head!" Paddy exclaimed.

"You can trust me, yer honor."

Tripoli felt perfectly satisfied on this score, and after a few more unimportant words the interview ended.

Like the skillful engineer, the Dusky Detective intended to prepare a mine which should bring destruction to the evil-doers.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE DECISION.

THIS time Tripoli did not undress, after the Irishman retired, but only removed his coat and extended himself upon the sofa, resolved to merely doze away the rest of the night, so as to prevent the possibility of another surprise.

He had turned the gas down quite low, so that the room was plunged in semi-darkness, and as he mused upon the situation an idea came into his head.

"If all I desired was the punishment of this murderous scoundrel, it would be possible to end the matter right speedily."

"All I would have to do would be to keep on the watch, and when another attempt was made to surprise me, with the aid of my revolver, I could mete out to him the violent death which his foul designs brought upon the woman whom I once loved so dearly."

"But I think I will be able to bring his crimes so clearly home to him that there will not be any necessity for me to aid him to cheat the hangman."

But, as the poet says, "the best laid plans of mice and men fail sometimes," and the Dusky Detective was not able to carry out his scheme to entrap the wily scoundrel who had wrought so much mischief within the walls of Raven Towers.

Fate aided the bold Gypsy Wolf to escape the trap which this untiring sleuth-hound prepared for him.

After depositing the prisoner in the vault, the confederates had repaired to Weathercroft's den, as he was wont to term it, and Gypsy Wolf brought forth a bottle of the rare old brandy with which he had regaled the stranger on the occasion when he had sought to get him under the influence of liquor so as to learn the real object of his visit to Raven Towers.

The master rascal filled out two "bumpers" and the liquor was drank with a relish.

"About as neat a job as I ever had anything to do with," Jamison remarked, with a great deal of satisfaction, as he smacked his lips over the potent liquor.

"Yes, yes, we handled the matter to the queen's taste," Weathercroft observed.

"And this fellow was a dangerous man to handle, too!" the other exclaimed.

"Dangerous!" Weathercroft cried; "you

may well say that! Never in all my experience did I ever encounter a man more likely to prove troublesome!"

"And it was strange, too; from the very first I had a presentiment that he was likely to cause me trouble."

"Oh, yes, I've often felt that way when I ran across a cove; and I tell you what it is, governor, I always pay attention to them kind of warnings, too."

"Yes, men who lead the kind of lives we do, who tread the dark and dangerous path of crime, are not wise if they do not heed their presentiments, for, like animals, our instincts seem to warn us when danger threatens."

"You can bet your sweet life they do!" cried the other, shoving his glass across the table toward Weathercroft, as a hint that a little more brandy would be acceptable.

The master-scoundrel refilled the glasses, and again the two drank.

"Prime stuff!" Jamison ejaculated.

"Oh, yes, you would have to travel far to find any better."

"Say, governor, do you know I think you have made a mistake in this here matter!" the other exclaimed, abruptly.

"How so?"

"You ought to have made a finish of this business to once."

Weathercroft meditated for a few moments before he answered.

"Perhaps that would have been the better way," he said.

"Perhaps! There ain't any perhaps about it!" Jamison exclaimed.

"I tell you, governor, you don't want to take any risk in sich a case."

"S'pose the cove should manage to get out of the hole we put him in, how long would it take him to make our cake all dough?"

"Ah, but there isn't any danger of any such thing happening," Weathercroft replied.

"I knew a cove once—a mighty knowing cove too, and he said the things that people don't expect for to happen are allers the ones that are sure to come off," Jamison remarked, sagely.

"Oh, that is true enough; that is an old saying; the way the French put it is that the unexpected always happens, but in this case I don't think that there is any danger of the fellow escaping from the vault."

"It is by long odds the strongest prison I ever saw and I have had considerable experience in that line."

"So have I, governor, so have I!" Jamison exclaimed.

"Mighty few of the jails in England, that amount to any thing that I hain't seen the inside of, but I think you can discount me in that line, and what we don't know about jails ain't worth knowing."

And then the two experienced scoundrels laughed as though they thought the joke a good one.

"One time though I must admit the vault didn't hold its prey," Weathercroft remarked, reflectively.

"Oho! you don't say so, governor? Then you have used the thing afore?"

"Yes, but in this case of which I speak I was betrayed by a pal who helped the prisoner to escape."

"I see, I see; well that can't happen now, for in this business I am as deep into it as you are, and there wouldn't be any money in the job for me if I was to go back on you."

"Oh, I know that, and I know that you are sensible enough to understand it, but in this case of which I speak, my pal was a fool and he thought he could make more money by going back on me than by sticking to the man who had put a fortune in his way."

"The game didn't work though, for I was down on him like a nail and the result was that he got his windpipe squeezed."

"And served him jolly well right too!" the other exclaimed.

"I tell you what it is, governor, I ain't got no use for a pal what goes back on the man that puts up the job!" Jamison exclaimed, decidedly.

"But I say, give me another snifter of the brandy and then I'll be off to bed."

The liquor was duly disposed of and then Jamison suggested that it wasn't worth

while to undress and that he would take a "snooze" on the sofa.

Weathercroft thought this was wise, and so without removing their clothes the two extended themselves, one on the bed, the other on the lounge.

CHAPTER XXV.

AN IMPORTANT DISCOVERY.

WITHIN ten minutes the lesser rascal was fast asleep, for not having as much at stake as his companion, he was not troubled by misgivings in regard to the ultimate result.

It was nearly an hour before the Gypsy Wolf got to sleep, and then it was only a troubled and uneasy slumber that visited his couch.

Again in his dreams the stirring events of the last few hours were re-enacted.

But in addition to what had really happened, in dreamland a sequel came.

He thought that his victim had not the least difficulty in walking through the solid walls of stone that formed his cell, came straight to his apartment, despite the bolts and bars which were in the way, and, clutching him by the throat, cried out that he had come to drag him to justice.

With a guilty start and an exclamation of horror, Gypsy Wolf awoke, and, old and desperate criminal though he was, the dream made such an impression upon him that he could not sleep.

The old adage, which has been responsible for so much bloodshed since some genius of evil first conceived it and gave it to the world, of "dead men tell no tales," haunted him.

"Yes, yes, Jamison was right about this matter," he muttered as he lay on his back and stared up at the ceiling.

The gas had been left burning, and though it was turned down low, it afforded light enough to enable all objects to be seen.

"I ought to have settled the fellow when I got him down in the vault.

"Why should I show him any mercy? He would not show me any if he once got me in a tight place.

"Ever since I can remember I have been hunted like the wolf whose name I bear.

"Never yet have I ever found any one who was disposed to show me any pity, and from what I have seen of this man I feel certain that he would crush me beneath his heel with as little mercy as though I was a venomous snake crawling in his path, if he got the chance.

"He has come in disguise to Raven Towers for the sole purpose of destroying me. Why, then, should I hesitate to strike the blow which will forever remove from my path the only man whom I have reason to fear?"

Weathercroft sat bolt upright on the bed any gazed for a moment at the figure of his sleeping pal extended upon the lounge.

"No good judge of mankind would for a moment think of comparing that man to me, and yet in such a case as this he, bulldog-like, would take measures to make success certain, where I, less bloodthirsty, would hesitate and possibly imperil the whole enterprise.

"It is settled—no more nonsense!" he exclaimed, rising to his feet.

"The man must die! Dead men tell no tales, and he must perish that I may live!"

Then crossing the room to where his companion slept upon the sofa, he laid his hand upon his shoulder.

"Hey, Jamison!" he said.

"Hello! What's up?" exclaimed the other, waking immediately and sitting up, ready for action.

"I have been thinking about what you were saying over our brandy, and I have come to the conclusion that the saying in regard to dead men telling no tales is a mighty wise one."

"Well, now, governor, you can bet all the money there is in the world on that, and be safe to win every time, too!" Jamison observed, with a sagacious nod.

"Yes, I think so. I have got into this affair too deeply now to hesitate."

"You are hitting the nail right on the head every time. What is one crime, more or less, to men like you and I, who have so much to answer for?"

"Come on, then, and we will make an end of our man at once."

"That's the ticket!" cried the other, decidedly. "That's the way to talk! Why, a cracksman who had never done a first-class job in his life wouldn't hesitate in a case of this kind.

"It's a clear thing all the way through. You must either kill this fellow and get him out of the way, or else he may be able one of these days to put a hempen necktie around your elegant throat."

Gypsy Wolf winced, and a dark frown appeared upon his face.

"I'll fix this swarthy scoundrel so that he will not be able to trouble anybody in this world, before he is an hour older!" he exclaimed.

And as he spoke, he drew out his revolver and examined the workings of the lock, so as to make sure that it was in perfect order.

"How are you going to work the trick?" Jamison asked.

"Oh, it will be easy enough. After the cell-door is unlocked, you hold the lantern so as to throw the light into the room, then as he naturally advances, I will settle him for good and all."

"Right as ninepence!" cried Jamison. "That is the way to do business, and the only way, too, I can tell you. Make things as safe as you can every time, and then you needn't lay awake at night a-wondering how soon the 'beaks' will be after you."

"Come on, for morning is near at hand, and there isn't any time to be lost."

"How about the pistol-shots?" the other inquired.

"What about them—do you think they will alarm the house?"

"Yes, that was what I was squinting at."

"Not the slightest danger," Weathercroft replied, confidently.

"This is no modern-built house, and the walls are as thick and solid as one of the old-time castles.

"And even if some faint report of the shots were heard it would be an impossibility for any one in the house to locate the sounds or decide what they were, so we have nothing to fear as far as that is concerned."

"Go it then, my tulip!"

Again through the secret passage the two men descended to the underground apartment, Gypsy Wolf in the advance with the lantern.

When they arrived at the door of the cell wherein the Dusky Detective had been placed they came to a halt.

Weathercroft gave the lantern to his companion and taking out his revolver, put it in readiness for action.

"A good idea has just occurred to me," he said.

"I will remain concealed behind you when you open the door and you must pretend that you have come to rescue him and then when he comes through the doorway I will fire at him and at such short range the bullet must be effective and the chances are a hundred to one that the first crack will finish him."

"Oh, yes, that is a pretty sure thing. You have a head on your shoulders and no mistake, governor!"

"Here is the key, unlock the door and let us make an end of the business as speedily as possible!" the master scoundrel exclaimed. Jamison obeyed the injunction.

And when the door was unlocked and opened he flashed the light of the lantern into the apartment and called out:

"Hallo! is there anybody in here?"

But there was no answer—no sign of life within the cell.

Jamison was puzzled, while a look of alarm appeared upon the face of the Gypsy Wolf.

But to the minds of both of the scoundrels a reasonable explanation occurred.

Their victim had not yet recovered from the effects produced by the assault upon him.

Acting then upon the idea that they would find Tripoli helpless upon the dungeon floor the two advanced cautiously into the cell.

Great was their amazement when they discovered that it was empty.

The prisoner had disappeared.

In blank consternation they gazed upon each other, not knowing what to make of this strange occurrence.

"What the blazes does this mean?" cried Jamison.

And as he spoke he flashed the light of the lantern into the corners of the apartment as though he expected to see the prisoner crouching in one of them.

"What does it mean?" repeated Weathercroft.

"Why, it means that the jig is up!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE FLIGHT.

NEVER were there two more disgusted rascals than Gypsy Wolf, *alias* Weathercroft, and his confederate, the English cracksman, who masqueraded as the butler in Raven Towers.

First they glared around the cell and then they stared at each other.

"Well, hang me! if this don't go ahead of my time!" Jamison exclaimed.

"I didn't think that the man lived who could get out of this hole after he was once clapped into it."

"There is something wrong about the matter!" the other exclaimed.

"And this is not the first time, either, that a prisoner has escaped from this cell without leaving any trace of how the job was done. But on the previous occasion I believed my pal, who had been set to watch the party, had played me false and aided the prisoner to escape."

"No such business as that this time!" Jamison observed.

"Oh, I know that; even if I did not fully trust you, I know that the key has not been out of my pocket, and there hasn't been any chance for you to try any double game even if you wished so to do."

"And now I see I wronged my old pal whom I suspected of aiding my other bird to escape."

"But how did our man get out of this strong box?" asked Jamison, completely puzzled by the mysterious affair as he gazed upon the stone walls so massive in their strength.

"There must be a secret door somewhere in 'the cell,'" Weathercroft observed after meditating in regard to the matter for a few moments.

"There cannot be any other explanation. I never had any suspicion that such a thing existed, and so I never searched for it; but now, although time presses, I will devote a few minutes to an inspection of the walls."

The two at once set to work and it did not take them long to discover the secret door and explore the passage leading to the water.

Perfectly satisfied that they had solved the mystery of the prisoner's escape the two quitted the underground apartment and ascended again to Weathercroft's room.

"Well, governor, what is to be the next move?" Jamison asked.

For a few moments the master scoundrel did not answer, being too deeply occupied in meditating in regard to the situation, but at last he made reply.

"As I said before, the game is up and I think the best thing for us to do will be to get out as soon as possible."

"But this cuss will never be able to prove that we were the men who put up this job on him," Jamison suggested.

"Jest you think how carefully we were disguised."

"I know that—I have considered and given due weight to all these facts, but in my soul I feel that there is a net gathering around me, and that if I do not get out soon the chances are I will find myself in a trap from which it will be impossible for me to escape, and so I have come to the conclusion that the quicker I take French leave from Raven Towers the better it will be for me."

"There is a deal of sense in what you say, governor, and I allers believe that a man who is in our line of business, should pay attention to these little inside warnings."

"I kin see, in looking back over my own life, that I have often missed it by going into things when I didn't feel just right about the game."

"That is my idea exactly, and I don't remember in all my career that I ever had any luck when I went into a thing with a presentiment that it wasn't going to turn out well."

"This move is not at all unexpected,"

Gypsy Wolf remarked, with a cunning smile.

"In fact I have been preparing for just such a thing ever since I came into the place."

"It is always advisable to be prepared for emergencies, and the moment I commenced to feather my nest here I began to prepare, so as to be able to get out at a moment's warning."

"And a jolly good move it was, too, governor," Jamison exclaimed, with a nod of approbation.

"Oh, yes, there isn't the least doubt about that. My experience has taught me that no matter how fine the game may be that you are playing, the time will be sure to come when it will end, and then, if you are not prepared to get out, you are certain to fall into the worst kind of a hole."

"But come, we must get to work; there isn't any time to waste, for the morning light will soon be here, and there are some valuables in the house that I might as well collar as not."

"That's the ticket, governor, get all you kin lay your hands upon!" the other exclaimed.

"Since you are in for it you might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb."

"Exactly, and the charming young lady who presides so gracefully over this mansion has some elegant jewelry, diamonds and other precious stones, you know, that will come in very handy for us."

"Oh! it would be a sin and a shame for old professionals like us coves to leave any little trinkets of that kind behind us when we take our departure," the other remarked, with a grin.

"We'll make a clean sweep, never fear, and the rest of the plunder is already salted down, for the moment this swarthy-faced scoundrel made his appearance in the house, I felt satisfied there was going to be a struggle between us. From the very beginning, too, I have been afraid he would turn out to be too much for me, and so I have been making everything as secure as possible."

"The jewelry is in a safe in the girl's apartment."

"The key to her room can be easily turned with a pair of pincers from the outside, and the bolt upon the inside has been tampered with so that it will not offer any obstruction."

"The screws are all loose, and by gently pressing against the door from the outside, the socket of the bolt will yield."

"Oh, I tell you, governor, you've got a big head!" Jamison exclaimed, in admiration.

"Well, big or little, it will have to do me, for it is all I've got," Weathercroft remarked, as he unlocked a closet in one corner of the room and from it produced a bottle of chloroform, a sponge, a pair of pincers and a dark-lantern.

"Shall we put on our masks, governor?" the lesser villain asked.

"Yes, it will be prudent so to do," the other replied.

"Some of these young girls are light sleepers, and if she was to wake up and recognize us, it would be ugly."

"Oh, there ain't any doubt about that."

Weathercroft led the way, and the two proceeded to the apartment occupied by the young mistress of Raven Towers.

Thanks to the measures which Weathercroft had taken in anticipation of just such a scheme as this, an easy entrance was gained to the room.

The master-scoundrel had explained to his companion the part he wished him to play, and Jamison, who was no novice at this sort of thing, took his position by the bedside of the sleeping girl.

He had saturated the sponge with the potent, pungent liquid contained in the bottle, and stood ready to apply it to the nostrils of the sleeping girl the moment she showed any signs of awaking from her slumber.

Gypsy Wolf proceeded to the safe.

It was locked, but as the intruder was familiar with the combination, this fact did not trouble him in the least.

Deftly he manipulated the knob, and in a second or so the door swung open.

The precious trinkets of the young girl were at the disposal of the robber.

There was quite a sum of money in the

safe, together with a large amount of Government bonds, and Gypsy Wolf made a clean sweep of everything.

Then the two retired as noiselessly as they had come.

The girl slept on, unconscious that the privacy of her apartment had been invaded. The gray light of the dawn was beginning to line the eastern skies when the two men left the house, but the inmates of Raven Towers were not early risers, and not a soul in the house was astir when the fugitives fled from the mansion.

Weathercroft led the way to a wooded point which jutted out into the river from an unfrequented part of the grounds attached to the house, and there, concealed in the bushes, was a small boat.

"Now, give me a hand to put the boat into the stream, and then we'll be off," Weathercroft said, as he produced the oars from another clump of bushes and placed them in the boat.

It was an easy matter for the two to commit the light craft to the water, and then they embarked.

Jamison took the oars, in obedience to Weathercroft's request, while the latter sat in the stem and directed the course of the boat.

"Where away?" asked Jamison, as he plied the oars.

"To a secure hiding-place, where we can lie snug for a few days," was the reply.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE ROGUES FALL OUT.

Gypsy Wolf was a master scoundrel; there was no mistake about that, and he had planned all the details of this enterprise with wonderful skill.

Upon the opposite bank of the river, right under the shadows of the Palisades, as the rocky wall which hems in the swiftly flowing Hudson on its western bank, is called, was a rude shanty, sadly out of repair.

It was about a mile down the river from Raven Towers, in a lonely and unfrequented spot.

Who had erected the house and for what purpose no one knew.

There was no way of gaining access to it excepting by way of the river, for by land the path alongside of the water led over the rocks and was so difficult as to defy any human not surefooted as a goat.

In anticipation of just such a flight as this Weathercroft had taken possession of the old shanty.

Working upon it by stealth the door and window—it only boasted one—had been repaired.

The door had been fastened by a stout padlock and the window protected by a strong shutter.

Within the shanty were a couple of suits of stout coarse clothing such as men engaged in the fishing business would wear, together with some old nets and rude housekeeping utensils, and in one corner evergreen boughs had been cut and piled up, forming a sort of rude bunk.

Under the bunk was a secret hiding place where a stout box which had been transformed into a sort of a chest was hidden in the earth.

Into this box the fugitive put the valuables which had been secured, together with the clothes which they had worn, donning the rough fisherman's garb instead.

A bottle of staining liquid had been provided, thanks to the forethought of Gypsy Wolf, and when the two had got into their rough clothes and stained their hands and faces with the brownish fluid, they looked for all the world like hardy sons of toil who wrung a precarious living from the waters of the Hudson.

"There, I think this will do," Weathercroft remarked, complacently, when the transformation had been completed.

"It would require a keen-eyed detective indeed to recognize us in this rig, and then the chances are a thousand to one that nobody will take the trouble to come near us. It is just in the height of the fishing season and therefore there isn't anything strange in our being here."

"We will spread our nets and attend to our business just as if we were actual fishermen and there is hardly any danger that any one will trouble their heads about us."

"It's jest as fine a plan as ever was hatched!" Jamison declared, enthusiastically.

"I think it will work," Weathercroft remarked.

"Our flight from the house will speedily be discovered and when the girl finds that her jewelry is gone the inference will be plain that we have helped ourselves to the property."

"The police will be notified and the detectives put upon the scent at once for we have got away with pretty nearly ten thousand dollars' worth of plunder."

"By thunder! that's a big haul!" Jamison interjected, with sparkling eyes.

"Yes, and the detectives will leave no stone unturned to discover what has become of us, and of course they will immediately jump to the conclusion that we have gone to New York, and, for a while, they will search high and low for us."

"You bet! but the keenest of them will never be able to smell us out here!"

"There isn't much danger that any of the bloodhounds will be shrewd enough to dream of looking for us so near at hand," Weathercroft observed, with a chuckle.

"We can hide here until the row is over, as it will be in a short time, and then we can depart without running any risk of being detected."

"Oh, governor, I tell you, you have got a big head on your shoulders and the more I see of you the more I understand how it is that you have been able to play this big game so successfully; but I say, don't you think that it would be better for us to divide this swag and stow it away on our persons? While we are out on the river something might happen to this blooming old shanty—it might catch fire, you know, or somebody might come up by land and go through the place and skin us of our boodle."

"No, no, there isn't any danger of that," the master scoundrel observed, with a side-long glance at his companion, for this proposition was not at all to his liking.

"Well, nobody knows certain about any such thing, you know, and I believe that a man always ought to be on the safe side," Jamison remarked.

"Oh, yes, but we are safe enough; there isn't the least danger of anybody discovering our secret hiding-place in this old shanty."

"How much did you figure the plunder to be worth?" asked Jamison, taking out his pencil in a business-like way and at the same time producing a memorandum-book very much the worse for wear.

"About ten thousand dollars," rubbing his hands together softly.

By this time he had recovered his composure, which had been somewhat disturbed by the manner of the other and was again the genial man of business.

The change in the manner of the other, slight as it had been, had sufficed to put him on his guard, for to his quick comprehension it revealed that there was likely to be trouble ahead.

Unconsciously—for Jamison did not intend to do anything of the sort, and so reveal his game before he got ready to play it—the other had assumed the air of a man who was going to make a demand in regard to which he anticipated trouble, and was already bracing himself to meet a storm.

"Ah, yes, ten thousand dollars," and Jamison made the figures upon a page of the book.

"Lemme see—the most of that is in diamonds, isn't it?"

"Yes, there's about five hundred dollars in bills, thirty-five hundred dollars in government bonds, and the jewelry makes up the balance."

"There's easily six thousand dollars' worth of jewelry, isn't there?" asked Jamison, who had jotted down the amounts upon his book as fast as they had been given him.

"Oh, yes, no doubt about that."

Then with quite a flourish Jamison added up the figures.

"Ten thousand—quite correct! A tidy bit of swag, and collared in as neat a manner as any trick was ever taken."

"I say, old pal, you have had a good thing in this here crib, eh, ha, ha, ha!" and he laughed vociferously, as though he considered the matter to be a deuced good joke, but

it was easy to perceive that the merriment was assumed.

"Oh, yes, I have done tolerably well."

"Had a fine innings, and no mistake; you have no right to complain."

"Of course not. You haven't heard me complain, have you?"

And as he put the question, Gypsy Wolf rubbed his hands together and gazed smilingly into the face of the other as though he had not the least suspicion of the game that his pal intended to play.

"You have collared fifty or sixty thousand dollars, no doubt—mebbe a hundred thousand?" and Jamison fixed his evil eyes with a cunning leer upon the face of the other.

"Oh, no, nonsense! No such sum as that! Why, man, do you think I have been robbing them by wholesale?"

"Now, come down! if you ain't had your arms in their strong box up to the elbows, then I'm a Dutchman!"

"Why, with such a fling as you have had, you ain't the man I take you to be if you haven't got away with all you could collar."

"Oh, I admit I have done pretty well, but no such sum as you mention."

"Well, you ought to have made it, for you have worked for it. Do you know, old man, I have had my eyes open ever since I came into the crib, and I feel pretty certain that it was you who cooked the goose of Mr. and Mrs. Ashburnham, and you settled Clement Bridges's hash too."

"Oh, I'm no such man!" the other replied, smilingly, as if it was a jest to be charged with such a series of horrid crimes.

"Now, if I was a common pal, you know, and got onto these tricks, why, I would be trying to put the screws onto you," and Jamison winked knowingly.

"I would be apt to say, old man, I have got you in a tight place, and I want a divy on the swag you collared before I came into the game, as well as this boodle, and as you are in a tight place, seeing as how if I peached you would stand a good chance to be hanged, in course you would have to stand the press."

"But you wouldn't do such a thing!" the other cried as if alarmed.

"Of course not, I'm no sich man! All I ask is a fair show at this boodle. It won't run ten thousand, you know, for the diamonds never fetch more than a quarter or a third of their real value."

"What do you think would be fair, two-thirds?"

"All of the cash and the bonds and a half of the diamonds."

"Oh, come, that is too much!"

"Those are my terms and you've got to take 'em."

"All right, it is a go!" Gypsy Wolf replied.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE WOLF SHOWS HIS TEETH.

A GRIM smile of triumph appeared upon the face of Jamison; he had not expected quite so easy a victory.

But then his thoughts ran:

"Gypsy Wolf was a sensible man and was wise enough to see that he was in a hole without any way of getting out except by yielding to the demands made."

"Better to yield all the booty than to risk his neck by getting into a quarrel with the man who had it in his power to put a rope around it."

Jamison felt well satisfied with the success of his plan, which he had had in his mind from the beginning.

It was his boast that he was always wise enough to let well enough alone, and in the present case he had come to the conclusion that if he could "persuade" his pal to give him the portable part of the swag which they had secured, he would lose no time in getting out of the country.

Enough was as good as a feast, besides he himself had not run any risk, to speak of, in securing the booty.

His pal had planned the job and done all the work, and now he was ready to play the lion's part and grab the best of the spoils.

In view of the success which had been so easily achieved it was no wonder that a broad grin overspread the countenance of Jamison.

But the features of Gypsy Wolf did not betray any vexation at being so completely in the power of the man whom he had taken for a tool, and who had so unexpectedly assumed the role of master.

The other knew that Gypsy Wolf was a philosopher and not apt to cry over spilt milk, and so the composure with which he took the matter did not excite any suspicions in his breast.

But he was not as well acquainted with his pal as he might have been, or he would have known that never yet had this master scoundrel allowed such a trick to be played upon him with impunity.

No pal—no tool—had ever yet attempted to measure strength with him without paying dearly for the rashness in the end, as the moldering bones of the unfortunate Clement Bridges, wasting away at the bottom of the old well in the cellar, could bear ample witness if their testimony had been called for.

His ready compliance with the demand—his willingness to make the deal, were but lures to blind the eyes of his pal.

In his heart glowed the rage of a lion who beholds a sneaking jackal attempt to steal away with the prey his royal highness had killed, and like the tawny chief of the sandy wastes, he panted for vengeance upon the audacious tool who fancied he was strong enough to measure strength with his master.

"You think then that the division had better be made now?" Weathercroft asked.

"That's my idea," the other replied. "I will own right up that I am eager to get my hands on the valuables, and I don't believe I kin really bring myself to think that they are mine until I have them stowed away in my pockets."

"Jamison, you are rather putting the screws on me in this matter," Gypsy Wolf remarked in a tone of remonstrance as he proceeded to remove the evergreen boughs so as to be able to get at the hidden treasure.

"Oh, no, governor, don't look at it in that way!" the other exclaimed.

"Why, I am trying to be liberal with you. Another cove who hadn't got any conscience would go in for the whole of the swag, but I would scorn for to rob a pal, who had allers treated me well in any such a way as that."

"You see, the fact is I want to get out of this blooming country as soon as I can; I don't think the climate agrees with me, and these Yankees ain't to my taste at all, you know."

"And now that I have collared such a tidy bit of plunder as this here swag I can go across the big pond and enjoy myself in old England like a gentleman, don't you see?"

"All right, you have the undergrip this time, and I suppose I will have to agree to your proposal although you have altogether the best of it."

"Well, governor, you must be a philosopher; sich things will happen in this world sometimes and the best way is to meet 'em with contentment, 'case my experience is that it ain't no use for to grumble when the luck is dead ag'in' you."

By this time Weathercroft had the box exposed to view.

"Let me give you a hand, governor!" Jamison added at this point as though he was afraid that the precious box by some hocus-pocus would be transported out of his reach.

Weathercroft was on one side of the hole wherein the box reposed and Jamison stooped upon the other.

This offered Gypsy Wolf the opportunity which he sought and as Jamison stooped to "lend a hand," quick almost as thought the master scoundrel "bucked" him.

That is, he raised his head suddenly and struck Jamison a terrible blow in the face with the crown of it.

It was an awful blow and taking Jamison entirely by surprise staggered him back half-stunned for the moment.

But for all that he retained sense enough to understand that Gypsy Wolf had turned upon him and that he must fight for his life and so, almost mechanically as it were, he reached for his revolver.

But his assailant did not afford him any opportunity to use the weapon, although he succeeded in drawing it.

Weathercroft had determined to attack

Jamison upon the first convenient opportunity the moment he found that his tool had resolved to put the screw upon him, and he had his eyes upon a heavy pine stick from which the branches had been trimmed.

It was about a yard long, as thick as a man's wrist at the butt end, and an uglier weapon could hardly be found.

When Jamison staggered back dazed by the blow and felt for his pistol, the Gypsy Wolf caught up the club and with a single well-directed hit upon the head brought the other to his knees.

Three times Jamison, with the pluck and fierceness of the bull-dog, essayed to rise and grapple with his foe, the pistol having been forced from his hand by the shock produced by the first blow, and three times the terrible club descended upon his head, Gypsy Wolf, demon-like, putting all his force into the blows.

The last one was a fatal stroke and, with a groan, Jamison rolled over on his side gasping in the agonies of death.

With a fiendish scowl the victor stood and gloated over the body of his victim.

"So perish all who dare to measure strength with me!" he cried.

"The poor fool, to think that he could play the master with such a man as myself!"

And with his foot he spurned the body in the most contemptuous manner.

"Now, then, this necessitates a change in my plans, and one which will be decidedly to my advantage, I think," he continued, regarding the body with a thoughtful expression upon his face.

"This fellow is about the same size as myself and when he is dressed in my clothes, no one would be able to tell that it was not me, excepting by looking at the face, and that point can be easily attended to. The features are already disfigured and it will be an easy task with a few slashes of the knife to render them more so."

"Then, to-night I will place the body in the river amid the rocks and anchor it with a line so that the sharp edges of the stones, as well as the teeth of the fishes, who will be attracted by it, will render it still more difficult of recognition."

"In the course of hours or of days the body will be discovered and every one will come to the conclusion that the body is mine."

"Weathercroft and Jamison fleeing with the plunder which they had secured, quarreled."

"Jamison killed Weathercroft undoubtedly, and then fled with the booty."

"Ergo then, there will be no search for Weathercroft, for as his body was found every one is satisfied in regard to his fate, but the pursuit will be hot after that scoundrel of a Jamison!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" and this arch-villain laughed merrily.

"If this isn't as cunning a trick as I ever had anything to do with, then you can take my head for a foot-ball!"

The scheme was indeed well-planned and success seemed certain.

Undoubtedly by it the police would be thrown upon a false scent.

The Gypsy Wolf proceeded to strip the body and then dress it in the suit of clothes which he had worn away from Raven Towers.

The suit which Jamison had worn he cut into small pieces and threw the fragments into the river.

When night came he anchored the body amid the rocks; and then, with the valuables concealed upon his person took to the boat and rowed down the stream.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE PURSUIT.

THE Dusky Detective reflected long and earnestly upon the best course to follow.

There was not the least doubt in his mind now that Gypsy Wolf, who had masqueraded under the name of Obadiah Weathercroft in Raven Towers, was at the bottom of all the mischief.

He firmly believed every word of the confession—the death statement of the man who had been condemned by Gypsy Wolf to so terrible a fate was true, and not until the avenging hand of justice was laid upon the throat of the fugitive would he rest satisfied. When the morning came and the hasty flight

of Weathercroft accompanied by the butler, was discovered, it seemed to be sure evidence of his guilt.

"Tripoli, after he examined the matter, became convinced that the arch-rascal had been preparing for such a thing for some time.

All his preparations had been made beforehand, and when the moment came for him to seek safety in flight, he was ready to start at a minute's warning.

And so carefully and cunningly had this accomplished scoundrel planned his flight from the mansion, that not the slightest sign in regard to which way he went could be discovered.

He had left the house—as far as the Dusky Detective could learn—during the early hours of the morning which had succeeded the night when Tripoli had first become acquainted with the secret vaults of Raven Towers.

Tripoli easily guessed the reason for the precipitate departure.

In some way the shrewd scoundrel had taken the alarm—had discovered that his plan to remove the interloping stranger, whom he justly deemed a dangerous foe to him, had miscarried.

"Possibly he may have changed his mind in regard to the advantage to be derived from keeping me a prisoner," the Dusky Detective mused, as he reflected upon the matter, "and having come to the conclusion that there was a great deal of truth in the old-time adage which says 'dead men tell no tales,' made up his mind to murder me, and so add another victim to his list.

"But upon returning to the cell to perform the crime, he discovered I had escaped from the toils and was among the missing.

"Unable to fathom the mystery of my escape, he immediately took alarm, and doubtless came to the conclusion that in the long run I would prove to be a foe too dangerous for him to cope with, and therefore his best course was to seek safety in flight, and content himself with the booty he had already secured.

"But I'll hunt him down, though I have to chase him to the very ends of the earth!"

Firm in this determination, the Dusky Detective came to New York.

He had secured a clerk which, if closely followed, he thought might amount to something.

From one of the servants he had discovered, through the Irish shrewdness of Paddy, the Gossoon, that Lord Gordon, when in New York, was accustomed to frequent an English chop-house situated on one of the up-town cross streets, a few doors from Gotham's great artery, Broadway.

Through Lord Gordon, Tripoli hoped to gain some information of the missing rascal.

At the beginning of the quest fortune smiled upon the Dusky Detective in the most flattering manner.

The keeper of the chop-house, a burly, beef-fed Briton, a typical Englishman, proved to be an old acquaintance of the avenger.

John Bruxton he was called, and Tripoli had once been his guest at a little public house which the worthy Briton kept in famous London town.

And the Dusky Detective had happened to be able to do the jolly Englishman a service.

An unwise investment in a "sure thing," a wonderful horse, certain to win the Blue Ribbon of the Turf, the famous "Derby," in a canter, "hands down," had brought the unlucky investor to such a state of poverty that the loss of his neat little "public" seemed probable, but the American stranger came to the rescue in the most generous manner, and advanced him a sum of money sufficient to enable him to tide over his difficulty.

This affair took place some ten years ago, but the Englishman recognized his benefactor the moment he entered his doors, although he could not for the life of him call him by name; but the reception that Tripoli received was hearty in the extreme.

"But may I be 'anged if I can remember your huppellation," the host said, at the conclusion of his welcoming speech.

"I call myself Tripoli at present—Osman Tripoli," the Dusky Detective observed, with a quiet smile.

"Oho! you're up to some little game, eh?" exclaimed the Englishman, with a knowing wink and a smile full of meaning.

The host, like nearly all his class, was a shrewd fellow and very quick to take a hint.

"Well, it's all right; I never dispute with a man in regard to his name.

"'Ang it!" he continued vehemently, dropping the letter H, as he was apt to do when wishing to be particularly emphatic; "if a blooming cove don't know his hown name, who should?"

"All I wish to remark is that if anybody had axed me what name I knew you by in the old country, it's Lombard street to a china orange that I wouldn't have said it was ary sich outlandish cognomen as that 'ere."

"Well, Bruxton, I am glad to see you, although you are about the last man I expected to encounter.

"I'm in search of a little information, and expected to have some trouble to obtain it—"

"Not if you want to get it out of me," the Englishman hastened to say. "I'll be proud and happy to oblige you in any way that I can, for I ain't forgot, sir, that I owe you a mighty big debt, and I'd only be too glad of any chance to pay it off."

"You have a good memory, I see," Tripoli observed, with a smile.

"A fellow w'ot wouldn't remember sich a service as you did me across the 'herring-pond,' ain't got no call to the name of man," replied the publican, with a great deal of dignity.

"The slight favor I was able to render you hardly deserves to be spoken of so warmly," Tripoli observed, deprecatingly.

"A slight thing in your eyes, maybe," replied the Englishman, "but a terrible big one in mine.

"You stood between me and ruin, and that is all there is to it, and you would be perfectly safe in betting all the money that there is in this world that I won't forget it while there's life in this 'ere old carcass."

"Men like you are rare in this world, for, as the wise sage remarks, 'gratitude for favors past is never so great as gratitude for favors to come.'

"But enough of this; I wish to learn something of a young Englishman known as Lord Gordon."

The landlord winked mysteriously as the name reached his ears, and then he went and closed the door which led to the main saloon.

The Englishman had conducted his guest into the small private room in the rear of the saloon.

The door closed, the host brought a chair for his visitor, and by motions invited him to be seated; then he drew up another chair alongside and said, in a mysterious whisper:

"W'ot's hup, anyway?"

"Nothing in particular. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, I was afeard that he had been gitting into some scrape or other.

"Do you know anythink about this blooming youth?"

Tripoli smiled at the odd expression.

"Yes, I am tolerably well acquainted with him. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, well, if you know him, you know w'ot kind of a duffer he is."

"Yes, I am aware that he is a little off color."

"Off color!" exclaimed the host, impressively. "Well, now, you can bet your bleeding heyes he is!"

"You see his father was a sort of pal of mine across the water, and that is the reason why I'm willing to do the boy a good turn when I can.

"He's a Gordon, sure enough, you know, but as for being Lord Gordon, or a sprig of nobility, why, that is all in my heye and Betty Martin!"

And as the landlord finished the speech he thrust his tongue into his cheek in a manner intended to be expressive of profound unbelief.

"Yes, I encountered the young man in Europe, and when I heard of him in this country, passing by the name of Lord Gordon, I knew he was sailing under false colors."

"Bless you! he's no more Lord Gordon than I am!" Bruxton exclaimed.

"I know that."

"But I say, has he been up to any tricks?" the host inquired, an anxious expression upon his fat face.

"I know he's a reg'lar Jeremy Diddler, up to all sorts of dodges, but for his father's sake I do w'ot I can for him, and when he came yesterday with an awful pair black eyes, and said he wanted to keep shady for a few days, as he was down on his luck, I accommodated him with a room."

CHAPTER XXX.

GORDON EXPLAINS.

"THAT was kind of you," Tripoli remarked.

"Well, as I said afore, for the sake of his father, now dead and gone, who used to be a pal of mine when we wasn't much more than kids, I've allers tried for to help the boy along, but if he's been hup to anything serious—anything worse than a leetle genteel swindling, I shall have to wash my hands of him," and the host looked earnestly at the face of his guest as though he expected to see there some signs as to whether his surmise was correct or not.

But the dark, stern face was as impassible as though carved out of marble and the jolly Englishman appeared disappointed.

"He's a kind of a confidence operator in a small way, as I s'pose you know, as you say you ran across him hover the water," Bruxton continued.

"He's a good billiard player and pretty sharp at cards, and so he manages to pick up quite a swell sort of living.

"But as far as I know he has never done nothink particularly bad—nothink, you know, for to make the law take hold on him.

"Bout all he does, you know, is to borrow money from the duffers whom he picks up, and if they are fools enough to swallow his ghost stories and shell out their mopuses with the idee that they are a-lending the cash to a real live lord, why they have only got themselves to blame."

"The matter upon which I come is a rather serious one and may involve the young man deeply if he has taken any important part in it," the Dusky Detective observed, gravely, and the serious tone caused the face of the host to lengthen considerably.

"Do you know a man named Obadiah Weathercroft?"

"Indeed I do!" replied the Englishman without a moment's hesitation.

"He's often been 'ere to see Gordon and I must say I never liked the chap, although I didn't know much of anything about him.

He had a kind of a sneaky way with him, that I didn't like, and the first time he ever came 'ere to see Gordon, I told the blooming kid, that he wasn't a man w'ot I would like to invest much money on, but the kid said he was all right, and he told me a reg'lar ghost story 'bout how this Weathercroft was the confidential man of business of some big-bug, and was going to put him—Gordon, you know—up to a trick or two w'ot would bring him more solid cash than would satisfy a duke.

"I told the kid that he might get badly left afore he got through, but he swore the think was solid and so I thought I had better keep my oar out and mind my hown business, and in a-doing of that I've known many a man for to get rich."

"The tale was true enough," Tripoli remarked.

"Weathercroft was the confidential agent of a wealthy family and now he has repaid the trust confided to his care by disappearing with all the valuables he could lay hands on."

"You don't mean for to say he has bolted with the swag?"

"Exactly; taken all he could get, and gone, no one knows where."

"This 'ere think don't astonish me in the least!" Bruxton declared, emphatically.

"I allers thought the fellow was too soft and soapy fer to be all right, and many's the time I've told Gordon that he had better keep his eyes open or the chap would be apt to put him in a hole."

"Has this man been here within the last two days?"

"Oh, no, I ain't seen him for a month."

"Could he have visited Gordon here without your knowledge?"

"No, no, that ain't possible!" the Englishman replied, decidedly.

"This crib is arranged like all public 'ouses so that nobody can get in or out without the knowledge of the man w'ot runs the place.

"That's so that our customers can't bolt without settling their scores, you know," replied the landlord with a wise shake of the head.

"But if you're going on the idea that Gordon knows anythink 'bout this 'ere fellow's cutting his lucky, I think you are away out, 'cos sich a think ain't in Gordon's line at all, and I take it that he's too old a bird to get mixed up in anythink that would be apt to give the law a chance to get hold on him."

"That may be so and yet the other may have given him some hint of his design."

"Yes, yes, that might be," Bruxton admitted.

"It will not do any harm for me to have a talk with the young man upon the subject," Tripoli suggested.

"Oh, no, not a mite. You'll find him upstairs, first door on the right," and the landlord led the way to the staircase.

"And if he is inclined to be at all ugly and you suspect that he is a-holding back anythink he knows which would be of service to you, jest call me and I'll put the screws on him in a way he won't like."

"Oh, I don't think I will have any trouble with him, but whether I do or not, I thank you for your offer all the same."

"Don't mention it!" responded the host.

Then the Dusky Detective ascended the stairs and knocked at the door indicated by the Englishman.

The voice of Gordon responded, inviting him to enter.

The Dusky Detective did so, and Lord Gordon who was stretched at full length on a sofa, flat on his back, smoking a cigar, rose to a sitting posture with an exclamation, decidedly profane in its nature, when he beheld the face of his visitor.

Tripoli quietly closed the door behind him and then helped himself to a chair.

"Well, hang your impudence!" the young Englishman exclaimed, when he beheld his visitor execute this movement, unable to refrain from betraying his annoyance.

"Hadn't you better wait for an invitation before you make yourself so much at home in a gentleman's apartment? And what in the deuce do you want here, anyway?"

"Patience, and you will soon learn," Tripoli replied, not taking the least notice of the irritation betrayed by the other.

"You may rest assured I have come to see you upon important business, or else I should never have troubled you with my presence.

"When did you see Weathercroft last?"

The abruptness of the unexpected question took Gordon completely by surprise, and for a moment he stared at the Dusky Detective, unable to guess the motive for the question.

And then, recovering from his astonishment, and his natural arrogance asserting itself, he replied:

"What business is it of yours, I should like to know?"

"Are you aware that Weathercroft has taken flight, carrying off with him a large amount of valuables?" Tripoli demanded, sternly.

The under jaw of the young man dropped, and the Dusky Detective felt certain from the expression upon his face that he was thunderstruck by the intelligence.

"Bolted!" Gordon exclaimed: "the cursed rascal! And he borrowed a hundred of me only a month ago, promising to return it by to-morrow

"Oh, what an ass I was to let him have it, and I thought I was a downy chap, too."

"Where did you get such a sum of money to lend?" asked the other, incredulously.

"I came honestly enough by it—won it on a horse-race, and was fool enough to boast of my good luck to this sharper, and he wheedled me out of it as neatly as though I wasn't anything but a country clodhopper."

"And so he did not take you into his confidence and warn you that some day he would be found among the missing?"

"Not much! If he had, I would be a hundred better off. And now, since the scheme has gone to smash, I don't mind telling you just what I know of him.

"Just by accident we happened to meet, a couple of months ago. It was in a gaming-hell. Weathercroft was a heavy gambler, for all that he looked as if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth.

"He saw at once, so he said, that I was true blue, and told me he had a plan by which I could make a pot of money.

"And the long and short of the thing was, I was to be introduced to this Miss Constance as an English lord, and he was to arrange a marriage between us, and after the job was done and I was in possession of the heiress, he was to have fifty thousand dollars for his trouble."

"And is this all you know of the man?"

"Oh, yes, I'm not lying to you. I'll own right up, I can lie with the best of 'em when there's something at stake, but in this case, as the jig is up, there's no use of beating around the bush.

"I never had much faith in the scheme as I didn't feel certain it could be worked, but he was one of the confident kind, in fact, the most accomplished scoundrel I ever met, and my acquaintance in that line is not small, I can tell you."

"This man is no common rascal but a man steeped in every crime. His right name is Gypsy Wolf," observed Tripoli.

Gordon started in amazement.

"The deuce you say!" he exclaimed. "Why, I've heard of the fellow in England; a dozen jails are yawning wide for him."

Tripoli rose, his face sterner than ever.

"It will be my task to hunt him down and though he escaped the law in the old world he may be less fortunate in this land."

And then he departed.

CHAPTER XXXI.

A BARGAIN.

THE landlord was in waiting, anxious to learn the secret of the interview and his satisfaction was great when Tripoli said there wasn't much doubt in his mind that Gordon was not a confederate of the villainous scoundrel who had taken refuge in flight.

The Dusky Detective was disappointed, the expected clew to the fugitive had not been found and he was utterly at a loss which way to turn.

In this perplexity Tripoli resolved to seek the counsel of the police authorities and so he made his way to the head-quarters of the metropolitan police in Mulberry street.

A patient and respectful hearing was given to his story, but the superintendent was not sanguine that the fugitive could be captured.

"To put salt upon the tail of a bird of such high degree when he has a good start is an extremely difficult matter, but I will do what I can for you.

"I will have a general alarm sent out and if he has not left the city we may nip him when he attempts to take flight.

"Honestly though, I do not think there is hardly a doubt that he is fully five hundred miles off by this time.

"So shrewd a rascal, as this fellow appears to be, will not let the grass grow under his feet in getting his precious person out of danger, particularly after he has succeeded in securing so rich a booty."

This was but cold encouragement, yet Tripoli thanked the chief politely and then took his departure.

An ordinary man would have been discouraged by such an unfavorable state of affairs, for so experienced a rascal-catcher as the chief of police of the greatest city in the New World, ought to have known what he was talking about and his words should have had weight.

But the Dusky Detective was no ordinary man, and his vast experience in two continents had told him that all men in high offices were apt to fall into ruts, and to believe that nothing can be accomplished if the work is not done in a certain way.

The "hue and cry" that the chief promised to send out, calling for the arrest of the fugitive, was all well enough, and might be productive of some good results, if the absconding rascal would be complacent enough to walk about in his own proper person, so that from the description even the dullest

police officer would be certain to recognize him.

But the idea that so acute and accomplished a scoundrel as Gypsy Wolf would be foolish enough to pursue such a course was not, in Tripoli's judgment, to be entertained for a moment.

A villain who had successfully defied the powers of the law and laughed to scorn the mailed hand of justice in both the Old World and the New, was not to be caught, like a novice in crime by the first booby of a policeman who encountered him.

Despite the theory advanced by the head of the police department, Tripoli was strong in the belief that the fugitive had not left New York.

He had once enjoyed the friendship of the great French detective, Victor Le Mars, a worthy successor to the ancient master thief-taker, the renowned Vidocq, and the experienced Frenchman had often declared to him that, like a fox, the hunted criminal generally returned to his original quarters, no matter how much he was hunted.

"Great cities attract great men," declared the acute Frenchman, "and all great criminals, sooner or later, find their way to the metropolises of the world.

"In the country, and in small towns everybody knows everybody else, and a stranger is at once spotted and suspected until it is surely determined who and what he is.

"In the great city no one knows his neighbor, or cares for him.

"Ergo, then, the metropolis offers to the fugitive, who fears the talons of justice, a refuge that is denied him elsewhere."

"And why should this fellow leave New York?" asked Tripoli, musing upon the subject, as he slowly made his way down the street.

"That he will try to leave the country, I doubt, for what other land can offer him more advantages than this one? Besides, from what I have learned of the man's history, it certainly appears as if there was hardly a country in the Old World where he would dare to set his foot for fear of the vengeance of the law which he has so often defied.

"Then, too, the jewelry which he carried away with him cannot be safely disposed of except in a large city.

"It is impossible, too, for him to suspect that I am aware of his true name.

"He will argue that the search will be for the confidential man of business, Obadiah Weathercroft, on the charge of embezzlement and robbery, because, as he was masked at the time of his attack on me, it would be impossible for me to identify him, even if I was conscious at the time of the assault.

"He will reason that all he will have to do is to drop the character of Obadiah Weathercroft and assume some other disguise.

"There is no particular reason why he, an old and experienced rascal, should fear a pursuit for such a trifling crime as this, a pursuit, which, from all outward seeming, will not be particularly hotly pressed.

"No, no, he will linger here in the city, confident in his ability to baffle all search for him, and, thanks to that confidence, I may be able to get my hands upon him."

By this time Tripoli had reached Broadway, and as he turned into the broad avenue the first man he encountered was "Lord Gordon."

The Dusky Detective, though, could hardly believe that he saw aright, for upon the face of the young man there was not now a trace of the awful "black eyes" which had disfigured the rather pleasing countenance of the young Englishman.

Gordon saluted Tripoli in the politest manner.

The way in which the dark-faced stranger had handled him had impressed him with the highest possible degree of respect.

He was a keen eyed fellow, this young adventurer, and he immediately noticed the look of surprise upon the face of the other and rightly conjectured what caused it.

"Don't see the discolored orbs, eh? The black and blue peepers are *non est*; there's a go into Latin for you!

"I suppose you wonder how I fixed the trick. A genius has arisen, an artist who, with his magic brush, removes all such unsightly discolorations, and I sent for him to make me presentable.

"But, by the way, you are the very man I want to see.

"I have been thinking over what you told me about that scoundrel of a Weathercroft, and as I feel deuced sore over the little hundred that the rascal tricked me out of, I don't mind taking a hand in the game.

"You want to catch him, and I'm open for an engagement to help you accomplish that agreeable but extremely difficult and rather dangerous task—for a consideration, of course.

"The laborer is worthy of his hire, as I heard a jolly parson preach one day when I was a boy in 'hold' England.

"And, to tell you the truth, I'm that short of mopuses that if it wasn't for old Bruyton, who, for the sake of my father—an old-time pal of his—allowing me to 'hang him up' for my lodgings and grub, I'm blessed if I wouldn't have a pretty tough time of it.

"So, you see, I'm open for a job. Set a thief to catch a thief, you know.

"While I am not exactly a thief, yet as I have been mixed up in considerable rascality in my time, I suppose I am near enough to one to meet the requirements of the adage.

"Now, if you choose to put me on the track of this old scoundrel, I have an idea I can succeed in trapping him."

"Well, you ought to be able to do something in that line, for I haven't any doubt you have acquaintances who are more or less shady in their characters," Tripoli remarked.

"So help me, Bob!" exclaimed "Lord" Gordon, dropping into the way of speaking familiarly known across the water as the "Arry style."

"I believe I have met and been on intimate terms with more queer cases, both on this side of the 'herring-pond' and the other, than any detective on the force, and as they hadn't any suspicion that I would ever attempt to 'pipe' them off, they let me see 'em just as they were in their true characters, while with the regular thief-catchers they are always on their guard.

"Oh, I've been in good society, you had better believe!

"As the fellow in the play says, 'I can drink with any tinker in the country in his own language,' and 'don't you forget it!' to use the slang native to this land of liberty."

Tripoli pondered over the matter for a moment, and then, coming to the conclusion that "Lord" Gordon's services would be valuable in this devious chase, promptly accepted the offer.

"It's a go, then?" Gordon said, eagerly.

"It is."

"And what am I to get? Excuse the question, but if you were as hard-up as I am, you'd come right down to business, too."

"What do you want?"

"It's both difficult and dangerous?"

"It is."

"I risk my life?"

"You do."

"How does a tenner a day, and I pay my own expenses, strike you?"

"All right; you shall have it."

And so the bargain was made.

CHAPTER XXXII.

IN THE BEND.

In all great cities there are two kinds of streets that speedily become well-known the country over.

When we speak of New York and mention Broadway, the man within the wide limits of the United States must be an ignorant dolt who is not familiar with the character of the avenue, and does not immediately recognize that Broadway is the famous great street—the main artery of the metropolis.

And on the other hand, when we speak of the Rue de Baxter, as the local newspapers are fond of terming this insignificant street of ill-repute when they feel in the mood to dish up a humorous police report, who is dull enough not to understand that in all New York there is hardly a street that bears a lower reputation?

To the mind of the average city man, the gulf which separates princely Broadway from dirty, ill-smelling Baxter street is about as wide as that which lies between Heaven and Hades.

In the old time when the Five Points cen-

tered the squalor and crime of the metropolis, Baxter street was in the very heart of the infected district, and although the city fathers, acting on the surgeon's idea of applying a knife to extirpate a dangerous sore, wiped away the Five Points by running a broad avenue right through it, so that where once the Old Brewery stood—as great a plague-spot as ever reared its head and had its being within a city's walls—commercial warehouses now rear their lofty heads toward heaven—yet Baxter street is still about the same, not quite so bad, perhaps, as in the old time, yet still far from being a desirable locality for any family particular as to their surroundings.

Not that we, in making such a statement, wish to be understood as implying that there are not plenty of good, honest folks, who—from the press of cruel circumstances, are forced to live where best they can—live in Baxter street.

The poor cannot pick and choose, and honest poverty finds shelter in the Rue de Baxter as well as the vicious and dangerous class whose actions had affixed such an unsavory reputation to the street.

During the last ten years the lower end of the thoroughfare near Chatham street, has assumed quite a commercial look, a quantity of small stores having sprung up there, mushroom-like.

Dealers in second-hand goods there most do congregate, and the thrifty sons and daughters of Israel are largely in the majority.

A short distance up the street from the point where it runs into Chatham, there is a turn in the thoroughfare, and it is popularly known as the "Bend," and the "Bend in Baxter street" has during the last few years won quite a local reputation.

The Italians are to be found there in strong force, and low saloons abound.

Here that purely American institution the "stale beer dive," rears its head.

The stale beer "shebang" is, probably, the cheapest drinking place on earth, for if a thirsty customer has only a couple of cents in his pocket, that "wealth" is sufficient to purchase a drink.

The beer is not procured from a brewery, but is collected in tin cans from the supposed-to-be empty kegs, placed in front of the regular beer saloons—after the contents have been drawn off—in readiness for the brewery wagons.

Miserable old bummers make a business of draining the dregs from the kegs, and as there are often twenty to thirty kegs in front of a single large saloon, containing from a pint to a quart of liquor, a man who pursues this peculiar calling diligently, will collect quite a quantity of the vile stuff in a few hours.

The stale beer is sold to the stale beer dives, the "dead houses" as they are familiarly termed, and by them retailed by the glass to their wretched customers.

To the Bend in Baxter street Lord Gordon conducted the Dusky Detective on the night following the day when the events related in our last chapters took place.

The two men were carefully disguised, and so complete was the rig which they had adopted, and the way they had changed their appearance, that it is certain that their most intimate friends would not have recognized them.

Both looked like genuine Italians; the dark face of the Dusky Detective was exactly suited to such a disguise, and Gordon had stained his features with a dark mixture, which he procured from a druggist and had covered his light locks with a black wig, the hair of which was twisted into little kinky curls, similar to those sported by a great many of the dark-skinned sons of sunny Italy.

The idea of this expedition was due to Gordon.

The adventurer had an extremely retentive memory.

As he explained to Tripoli:

"A man who like me depends upon his wits to give him a living, must never forget anything he hears, for there's no knowing when it may prove useful.

"Now some time ago, just after Weathercroft and I got on intimate terms—just after the time, you know, when he suggested that I could make a big strike by capturing the heiress, something happened to be said one

day about the Italians in the Bend of Baxter street and the strange phases of city life to be seen in that quarter.

"Well, the amount of information that man possessed on the subject was really astounding. I thought I was pretty well posted myself in regard to all the ins and outs of city life, but he could double discount my knowledge.

"Of course it was not my game to allow him to see that I knew anything about such a low subject, for I was doing my best to keep up appearances, and I even went so far as to express my astonishment at the knowledge he possessed.

"His explanation was reasonable enough. He had once been assaulted and robbed of a valuable watch and chain and in company with a detective officer had made a tour through the Bend in order to identify the thief.

"I did not pay much attention to the matter at the time, for it mattered little to me whether he was intimately acquainted with any of the low life of New York or not.

"But it struck me then that he described the thing like a man who had once been extremely familiar with it."

"No doubt he is," the Dusky Detective observed. "I am satisfied from what I have learned of the fellow that he is a rascal of the first water."

"The name that you gave him, Gypsy Wolf, set me to thinking," Gordon observed.

"There's a lot of Italian Gypsies who usually frequent one of the saloons in the Bend, a gang of pretty desperate fellows too, ready to turn their hands to almost anything from horse-stealing to murder.

"All Gypsies, you know, always cling together, it doesn't matter where they come from.

"Now, being a Gypsy where would our bird be more likely to seek refuge than among his Gypsy brethren?"

"Very true, the surmise is reasonable."

"I'm well acquainted with nearly all of the gangs that frequent the Bend, for as you probably suspect, I have been intimate with some pretty tough chaps in my time.

"Among the Gypsies, Weathercroft will probably pass by his own name, for he will reason that no one in this country knows him by that name, and so he will be safe from discovery."

"Yes, yes, that appears to be a correct supposition."

"And even if we don't find our man in the Bend—if he has taken refuge in some other quarter of the city—we may be able to get a clew to his whereabouts, if we prosecute our search carefully, so as not to let the boys know that we intend to clap the steel bracelets upon our bird if we find him."

And thus it happened that the two men, carefully disguised, found their way to the Baxter street dens on the night of which we write.

It was about eleven o'clock when the two turned into the street, for Gordon had warned his companion that there wasn't any use of coming earlier.

The boys of the Bend were nocturnal birds and darkness suited them far better than the sunlight.

"During the day they are scattered all over the city," the guide explained.

"Some few engaged in honest work, but by far the greater part pick up what they can by hook and crook, and then when midnight comes back to the Bend they troop.

"There are plenty of 'fences' hereabouts; a 'fence,' you know, is the place where stolen goods can be disposed of without difficulty."

"I understand," Tripoli observed; "knocking around the world has made me familiar with a little of almost everything."

"We'll try one of the stale beer dives; there's one of the dens that the Gypsies use as a sort of a head-quarters, and I think the chances are good we can get on the track of our man there."

The two lounged up the street, their disguises so perfect that not a soul whom they encountered had the slightest suspicion that they were other than what they appeared to be.

Two men better calculated to play to perfection the roles which they had assumed could not have been found in the city.

Both had sojourned in Italy and were familiar with the people and the language.

Gordon was a devil-may-care fellow, who had done nothing but get into and out of scrapes for years, and although an adventurer with but little principle yet still was game to the backbone.

While the Dusky Detective was as stern and determined as fate itself.

Two more dangerous foes a fugitive never had upon his track.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE RUSE.

"Now, then, what game are you going to play?" Gordon asked, as they approached the stale beer dive.

"What game?"

"Yes; everybody in the street follows some lay, you know, even to the fellows who pick up a living by going around with a tin can collecting the stale beer from the emptied kegs left outside the saloon doors," the young Englishman answered.

"Now, when we get into the saloon, in order to find our man it will be necessary to get upon familiar terms with the men who are regular customers of the dives, and one of the first questions which will be asked is in regard to our business."

"Very true, the point is well taken; and now the question is—what business will suit us best. We are not exactly the thing for organ-grinders—"

"Oh, no, that wouldn't do; no respectable calling, you know; that wouldn't answer," Gordon remarked.

"We must represent ourselves as gentlemen whose reputation is more or less shady, or else we shall not be able to win the confidence of the men whom we desire to pump."

"It is among men of evil character that we must look for traces of Gypsy Wolf, and in order to win their confidence we must make out that we are as bad as they are."

"How would it do to represent that we are a couple of Italian brigands who have left their country for their country's good?" the Dusky Detective asked.

"That is a good idea, and as the trade of brigandage does not flourish in this country, we have come to the conclusion to try our hand at something else."

"I think that tale will pass as current coin," the Dusky Detective remarked.

"And would it not be a good plan to drop mysterious hints that we know of a fine opportunity to make a good haul, but that it needs a man who is posted in regard to a particular line of business in which we have no experience?"

"Yes, an excellent idea."

"This man of whom we are in search bears a high reputation as a house-breaker, I believe."

"Yes, I think that is correct; but after having secured so rich a booty as he gathered in this last exploit, he will not be apt to trouble his head with any new enterprises for some time to come," Tripoli observed.

"My idea is that he will try to get out of the country as soon as he can," Gordon continued.

"But, when I come to think the matter over, I am not sure I am correct in this supposition for he is 'wanted' by the police in so many places abroad that the Old World may be apt to be too hot to hold him."

"There's a good deal of truth in that," the Dusky Detective observed.

"It is more probable that he will not attempt to cross the water, but will go to the sparsely settled districts of the South or West, or even to the Pacific Slope, and there pose as a great man on the strength of his ill-gotten gains."

"My observations of such men have taught me that it is almost impossible for them to keep quiet, no matter how great the prize which they have the luck to secure."

"They crave a life of excitement, and cannot live without it."

"It was not my idea that we could entrap him by pretending that we knew where some such booty could be secured, for he has succeeded so well in feathering his nest in this last adventure that he will not be apt to feel inclined to try any new schemes just at present, no matter how lucrative they appear."

"My hope was to arouse the cupidity of some rascal who was acquainted with our man, and knew his hiding-place, and he, in hopes to get Gypsy Wolf to take hold of the

matter, and so enable him to get a share of the booty, would endeavor to enlist our game in the scheme, and so betray to us his hiding place."

"I see, and I think the scheme ought to work," Gordon observed.

"There isn't much doubt that the fellow is concealed somewhere in the city."

"He is an old bird, and has been through this sort of thing a hundred times in his life, and as well as any man living he knows how fast the 'hue and cry' travels by telegraph."

"And though he is a very Proteus in person for assuming disguises, yet he understands that by far the safest course, in a case of this kind, is for him to seek a safe hiding-place in the city, and lie quiet until the excitement passes away."

"New York is too big a city now for any affair of this kind to occupy the public attention for more than a week at the most, then some new topic of interest comes up, and the other is crowded out of the way."

"He has been through the mill so often that he knows exactly what the chances are, and can calculate with perfect accuracy in regard to the affair."

"When a haul of this magnitude is made, the first thing that is in order is to notify the police, and then they in turn wire their brethren in the adjoining cities, after posting their own men, so it naturally follows that for a week or two after the robbery all the detectives and the police are on the alert in regard to this particular affair, and if the guilty man is unwise enough to stir abroad, he runs a great risk, for unless he is a master hand at disguising himself, he stands a good chance of running across somebody who, being on the lookout, will be pretty certain to recognize him."

"Yes, no doubt about it, and as he knows it would be impossible for him to outstrip the telegraph in speed, even though he had some six or eight hours' start, the chances are great that he has not taken refuge in flight, but is at this moment concealed in some obscure locality in the city," the Dusky Detective remarked.

"The strong point in our favor is that we know his Gypsy title, while it is utterly impossible that he can be aware, or even suspect, that any one in this country possesses the knowledge."

"He, feeling perfectly safe in the fact that no one knows that Obadiah Weathercroft and the man with the clouded reputation, known as Gypsy Wolf, are one and the same, will not attempt to find concealment under some other name and so we may be able to get on his track."

By this time the two were at the entrance to the stale beer dive and the conversation came to an end.

Both of the adventurers acted their character to the life as they slouched into the low den, casting suspicious glances around them as though they were men who feared to feel the weight of the strong hand of justice upon their shoulders, and expected to see an officer of the law in every shadow.

There was a motley gang in the den, and though they all gaped curiously at the newcomers, recognizing on the instant that they were strangers, yet they carried themselves so well that no alarm was created by their appearance.

Seating themselves at one of the tables in the rear of the room they called for some beer and were served by the keeper of the dive in person, a dark-browed, sullen-looking Italian, by name Pablo Vincentio, although he was better known to the low world, in which he played so prominent a part, as Fra Pablo.

If reports were true, at one time he had been one of the most desperate brigands in all Italy, but when his native land grew too hot to hold him he fled across the ocean and sought safety in America.

The Italian government had attempted to reclaim him, but the criminal lawyers whom he employed, were too able for the counsel of the Italian government and the attempt failed.

Finding that there wasn't any opening for him in the brigand line in this country he by the advice of some of his comrades, who had preceded him to the land of liberty, opened a stale-beer dive, and, from the very beginning, the police had marked the place as one that would bear watching.

It was the head-quarters—the house of call—of some of the most desperate Italian criminals in the country.

And although the detectives were never able to secure any proof that Fra Pablo personally had anything to do with the crimes, the doers of which had been tracked to his door, yet the acute bloodhounds were satisfied that the deeds were planned in the stale-beer dive and, in a majority of the cases, Pablo found the money to enable the men to go ahead, and in police parlance, "put up the job."

When Fra Pablo put the beer upon the table he surveyed the pan with the eye of a hawk and as they noticed the inspection, although they pretended not to see it, the same thought occurred to both of them.

If they were not detected now—if they could deceive the keen eyes of this experienced criminal they had naught to fear from any one else.

But as we have said, thanks to their knowledge of Italy and the skill with which they had got themselves up, their disguise was perfect, and Fra Pablo had no suspicion that they were anything but what they appeared to be.

"Good-morning, gentlemen," said the host, in Italian, as he placed the beer upon the table.

"It seems to me as if I have not had the pleasure of seeing you in my place before."

"We are strangers in the city," the Dusky Detective replied, in the same tongue.

"Have just come from the—well, what matters it from where we came so long as we are here?"

He had checked himself in the middle of the speech as though he feared he was about to make an admission that might work him harm.

"True, true," observed the ex-brigand.

"In our native land, there is an old saying that all roads lead to Rome, and here in this country it could well be said that all roads lead to this city."

"But you need not fear to speak freely to me. I am your friend—the friend of all my countrymen, and if you have been in any trouble—what of it?"

"All men will get into trouble sometimes, and this is the very place for the man who seeks shelter to come."

"So, have no fear—speak freely. I am the man to trust and, who knows, if you are in quest of something good I may be able to put it in your way."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A "PLANT."

THE disguised men looked at each other, and then they surveyed the saloon-keeper, as though they were asking themselves the question as to whether it would be wise to trust him or not.

"Come, come, do not fear," he said, encouragingly.

"If you are strangers in the city I am the very man you want to take counsel of."

"Oh, I tell you, my friends, I have put many a good man up to a job which paid him well."

"So we have heard—we have heard you well spoken of, and that is the reason why we came here," the Dusky Detective observed.

"Oh, yes, we heard of you in Italy before we came to this country," Gordon remarked.

"It was said that you were a man who could be trusted."

"From what part of Italy come you?"

"Calabria, but it was in Genoa from where we sailed that we heard of you," Gordon replied.

"Genoa! Oh, yes, it is a fine city; I have many friends in Genoa," observed Fra Pablo.

"You understand, we were in a hurry—there wasn't any time to be lost," the Dusky Detective explained.

"Both my friend and myself are inclined to be a little hasty in our ways."

"'Twas night, and we met a brute Englishman on the Quay—a regular John Bull, who had more money than he knew what to do with."

"We are not beggars, neither Genarro nor myself, but we thought we could use a little of the Englishman's money, and we proposed

to gamble with him for it, like honest gentlemen; but the brute thought that we meant to rob him, and he set up a cry for the police.

"We could not submit to such an insult, there was trouble, and—well, the fool of a John Bull fell and hurt himself, you understand; it was not our fault. We could not hold the man on his legs, if he would cast himself down like an overlaid ass."

"Of course—of course; but you were fearful that trouble might arise from it, and so concluded to cross the seas," the host remarked, with a grin.

"Exactly. Some friends of ours were on a ship bound to New Orleans; she sailed that night and we went with her."

"Matteo has a rare head on him for getting out of a scrape!" Gordon chuckled, keeping up his assumed character to the life.

"And now, what is the good word with you—how propose you to gain your bread?" the saloon-keeper asked, with an alluring smile.

"Ah! I am a baker, but the heat of the oven does not agree with me," the Dusky Detective responded, "and I must look out for something else."

"I am a shoemaker, but I cannot sit long on the bench for the cramped position gives me pains in the stomach."

"Baker and shoemaker, bahl!" cried Fra Pablo, in genuine contempt.

"Speak not of such menial trades in connection with rare blades like yourselves!"

"Trust in me, and, upon my word, I will find you something better to do, if you only possess a little money so that you need not starve while you wait for the right chance to turn up."

The Dusky Detective glanced at his companion in a questioning sort of way, and Gordon, quick to catch the meaning of the glance, nodded his head.

"It is all right; speak freely," he said.

In truth, he hadn't the remotest idea of what game his companion was about to play, but he judged he had received his cue to speak, and so proceeded.

"We have not much money, you understand," the Dusky Detective remarked, sinking his voice almost to a whisper.

"But we have a jewel or two that are worth something if we can find the right man to buy."

"Yes, yes, I see," and the saloon-keeper nodded, significantly.

"You want a man who is not inquisitive—who minds his own business—who will not ask questions about a matter that does not concern him in the least, and who is willing to do what is right by you—who will not cheat you out of your eye teeth in the bargain!"

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed the supposed Italians in a breath.

"Ah, it is lucky that you came to me, for even such a man know I," remarked the saloon-keeper, complacently.

"He is a good friend of mine and when I say to him, these gentlemen are of the right stripe and you must do the fair thing by them, he will be glad to oblige."

"It is a good thing that you happened to meet me, a good thing too, that you are able to raise a little money so as to be able to wait and look around you."

"Who knows some chance may occur so you will be able to make money."

"Everything comes to the man who waits; it is an old saying and a true one."

"Oh, as to that; we happened by chance—as you say—to run across a game on which there is much money if we only knew how to play it," the Dusky Detective observed.

"Aha, say you so?" exclaimed the host, eagerly.

"Come, come, how lucky it is that we spoke together. Is there much money in the game?"

"What say you to diamonds as big as the end of one's finger?" the Dusky Detective asked.

The eyes of the Italian sparkled.

"Aha! that is good!" and he smiled until he showed every tooth in his head.

Then his eyes happened to fall upon the stale beer which was so bad that the disguised men, despite their wish to keep up their characters, were not able to do more than sip it.

"This stuff is not to your taste, eh?" quoth the host, and he shook his head as if to admit that it was a vile drink.

"Such beggarly stuff is not fit for gentlemen who have been used to better liquor. It is only for miserable peasants who know no better."

"I will stand a bottle of wine and we will drink to the success of our game, for I have no doubt that we can arrange some way to go into it."

Then Fra Pablo made a signal to the shock-headed boy who waited upon the guests.

When he came the host ordered a bottle of wine, and when the two came to taste the fluid they found it was of fair quality.

Then the Dusky Detective told his tale.

He represented that he and his companion had made their way from New Orleans by slow stages and having run out of funds at Philadelphia had been obliged to walk from that point to New York, not disdaining to pick up any portable articles that they happened to run across on the way.

They had pretended to be sailors who had been shipwrecked on the treacherous Jersey coast, and the tale they told was that they were endeavoring to reach New York, where they had friends.

They begged their way from house to house, and at one lordly mansion on the outskirts of New Brunswick, where, for a wonder, they had been hospitably entertained, instead of being immediately driven away, which is the treatment usually meted out to all beggars who apply to the "big mansions," they noticed that the lady of the house, who was gracious enough to listen to their story in person, wore a most magnificent collection of diamonds, and furthermore, moved to compassion by the pitiful tale which they rehearsed, she bestowed a dollar upon them to help them on their way, and the narrator stated that it was the only dollar bill she possessed, the rest being all hundred-dollar bills, so it was plain the lady carried a couple of thousand dollars with her.

Struck with the idea that there was a chance to acquire a rich booty with very little trouble, they had lingered in the neighborhood and examined the premises in the most careful manner; but although satisfied that a rich prize awaited within the house, yet, as the place was well-guarded with bolts and bars, they did not have sufficient confidence in their skill in the house-breaking line to attempt to "crack the crib."

"I know the very man who can do the trick," the Italian exclaimed.

"He is a genius in that line, an English Gypsy, who laughs at bolts and bars; but, as he seems to be flush at present, he may not be inclined to work."

"I can persuade him, though, if any man can, and it would be a shame to miss so good a chance."

The others agreed to this.

"Peste! we must not lose any time!" the host exclaimed, abruptly.

"Somebody else may smell out the game and try the trick if we allow the grass to grow under our feet."

"I will see my man this very night."

Then the Italian consulted the old fashioned silver watch which he wore.

"I know where I can find my bird within the next two hours. He is flush now, as I told you, although he pretends that he is not, but I know better, for he is too cunning a rascal to spend his money as freely as he is now doing unless he has plenty."

"He lodges with me, but he is like an owl and sleeps by day, and then, too, he is not here half the time."

"He is like the flea, you know; if you attempt to put your hand on him, he is not there."

"It is better for me to hunt him up than to wait for his return here, for it may be a week before I shall see him again, and there isn't any time to be lost."

"When the iron is hot it is the time to strike," the Dusky Detective observed, sententiously.

"Yes, yes, no doubt about it," Gordon hastened to remark.

"Meet me here in two hours and I may have some news for you," the Italian said, rising to his feet.

"Have you secured a lodging-place yet?"

The others shook their heads.

"Stay here with me then, I will give you a room as cheap as you can find in the city."

The others assented to this.

"Look around the street and amuse yourself; within two hours I will return," said the Italian.

"How call you your friend—I may know him; I have met many English Gypsies?" the Dusky Detective asked.

"The Wolf, and he answers well to the name. In two hours," and the host departed.

CHAPTER XXXV.

PREPARING THE TRAP.

"We are on the right scent," Tripoli observed to his companion as they sauntered out of the saloon.

"Yes, not a doubt of it."

"It is hardly possible that there can be two men known as the Wolf, and both of them English Gypsies," the Dusky Detective remarked.

"Oh, no, I don't think there is the least doubt in regard to the matter, and now if we play our cards well we will entrap our bird."

"Even if he does not fall into the snare—if he is so thoroughly satisfied with the plunder which he has already secured, that he does not care to engage in any new enterprise, our purpose will be accomplished just the same."

"We have got on his track—have ascertained his haunt and will be able to secure him."

"It was a lucky chance that you discovered his flash name, or else you would never have been able to trace him," Gordon observed.

"Yes, that came from the blow dealt him right from the grave by the man whom he doomed to die so terrible a death in the old well."

"If it had not been for my fortunate discovery of the secret contained within that gloomy pit, the odds are great that I should never have been able to get on the track of this murderous villain."

"Then, too, it is because the scoundrel has no suspicion that any one can possibly know that Obadiah Weathercroft and the Gypsy Wolf are one and the same, that he is not making greater efforts to conceal himself."

"In his own proper person he probably presents an entirely different appearance to that which he assumed when disguised as Weathercroft."

"The fellow is a very king of scoundrels, and if we had not been aided by the chance of fortune—the blind goddess apparently having entered the list on the side of justice—we would not have stood the least chance of entrapping him."

"Well, I never was much of a believer in religion and all that sort of thing," Gordon observed, slowly, "but in this case I must admit it seems as if there was a Providence, and it had interfered in this case expressly to bring Gypsy Wolf to justice."

"The man who would not believe with this evidence before him could not be convinced," the Dusky Detective replied.

By this time they were nearly a block away from the saloon, for they had walked slowly on as they conversed.

"Now then, while the Italian is in search of our bird, it seems to me that the best thing for us to do is to put ourselves in communication with the police, so that preparations can be made to secure the game after we discover it," Tripoli suggested.

"It would be advisable," Gordon remarked. "But we must take care that we are not 'shadowed' by some spy in the service of this Italian."

"Although he seemed to swallow our story fast enough, and apparently hadn't the slightest suspicion that we were not what we pretended to be, yet he may be playing a game, and, for aught we know, a spy may have been placed on our track."

"Measures have been taken to guard against just such a thing," Tripoli replied.

"The chief of police and myself discussed the matter in all its bearings."

"A room has been secured in a house in Houston street, just around the corner from the Police Head-quarters, and by sending a message through the nearest telephone, the superintendent can be summoned; so if we

use due precaution, it will be impossible for any one to detect that we are in communication with the police authorities."

"It's a deep game," Gordon commented, "and if we don't beat Gypsy Wolf it will be a wonder."

"By taking the Elevated road up-town, we can easily detect whether we are followed or not," the Dusky Detective remarked.

And as they proceeded up-town, they kept their eyes so carefully about them that it would have been an utter impossibility for any one to have played the spy upon their footsteps without their knowledge.

It was as the Dusky Detective thought. Fra Pablo had been completely deceived by the appearance of the disguised men, and had not the slightest suspicion that they were aught but what they represented themselves to be.

Then, too, as the Gypsy Wolf had kept his own counsel and had not uttered a single word to indicate that there was any danger that the police would "want" him, the Italian, when he volunteered to try and induce the other to go into the "game" proposed by the tramps, hadn't the slightest suspicion that he was leading the Wolf into a trap, and so never for an instant thought of setting spies upon the strangers.

When the two reached the rendezvous they found the superintendent of police in waiting.

He had been summoned by the telephone before the adventurers had taken the train on the Elevated road.

"Aha, I have news for you!" he exclaimed, the moment the two entered the apartment.

"I have found your man!"

The others expressed their surprise at this and then the superintendent proceeded to relate how a body had been discovered in the river, badly mutilated, but from the clothing had been identified as Weathercroft.

"The two villains evidently quarreled," the chief explained.

"Probably over the division of the spoils; Jamison murdered his companion and got off with the booty."

The Dusky Detective shook his head.

He had guessed the game of Gypsy Wolf immediately.

The discovery of the body dressed in Weathercroft's clothes made him believe that it was probable that a quarrel had taken place between the two, but Jamison had been the victim, not the victor, and the Wolf had taken advantage of the death of his antagonist to throw everybody off the scent by dressing the body of his companion in his own clothes.

Briefly Tripoli explained his theory to the police chief and showed him what good reasons he had for believing that the arch villain who had been known as Weathercroft was still alive.

The superintendent was amazed, for he was too old a man-hunter not to see what good grounds the Dusky Detective had for believing that the police were on the wrong scent.

"By Jove! this fellow is a master scoundrel!" he exclaimed.

"Well, go on in your scheme," he continued.

"I cannot see any reason why you shouldn't succeed, and you can depend upon my giving you all the backing you want. I will put some of my best men on the job, so if you find yourself 'shadowed' hereafter you will know what is up."

The Dusky Detective thanked the chief, and after a few more words relative to the snare which they were preparing for the benefit of Gypsy Wolf withdrew.

Half an hour later they were in the neighborhood of the stale beer dive again.

CHAPTER XXXVI. IN THE SNARE.

As the Italian expected, he found no difficulty whatever in finding the man he sought.

Gypsy Wolf was now making up for his enforced absence from the scene of dissipation in which his heart rejoiced.

While he was masquerading as the diligent man of business, Obadiah Weathercroft, he was careful to abstain from visiting any place where such a man as he was representing would not be apt to go.

But now that he had cast aside the dis-

guise, being well supplied with money, he had determined to make up for lost time, and so had entered upon the round of pleasures which the great city offers to the evil-minded man.

But so active was the mind of this extraordinary criminal, that he could not content himself with simply enjoying the delights that his money could so readily procure, and when Fra Pablo told the story of the two Italians, he jumped eagerly at the chance, not to take an active part in the matter himself, for he rightly considered that a man who had succeeded in clutching so great a stake as he had secured, would be an idiot to go into anything that might endanger his liberty.

His idea was to look into the matter, and if he thought, upon examination, that there was some big money in the scheme, he knew parties whom he could set to work to "crack the crib."

"I will go down with you now and have a talk with the fellows," he said.

And so the two set out.

In consequence of their promptness, Fra Pablo and Gypsy Wolf arrived at the saloon before the others returned.

When the supposed Italians came up the street, Pablo and Wolf were standing outside the saloon on the lookout for them.

Pablo introduced his companion to the disguised men, and then invited all of them to go into the private room, which was at the back of the main saloon, and have a bottle of wine with him.

Be it understood this generous offer did not cover champagne.

The wine was the thin, sour claret worth about twenty-five cents a quart.

Over the wine the five discussed the matter, Fra Pablo the most anxious of the three, for he thought he saw a chance to make some money without any trouble or risk.

And as the conversation proceeded Gypsy Wolf began to grow suspicious.

There was something about the strangers that did not seem right to him.

Years of criminal life had sharpened his wits, and like the criminals his instincts warned him of danger even when none seemed apparent.

But he was skillful enough not to betray to the others that he had any apprehensions, but talked freely.

The Dusky Detective was burning with a desire to arrest the scoundrel but did not dare to make the attempt until the police should be given time to get on the ground, for he judged it would be an almost hopeless task to try to make Gypsy Wolf a prisoner with the Italians so near at hand, who would be sure to come to his rescue unless awed by a police force.

Gradually the truth began to dawn upon the desperado.

"Both these men are disguised and neither one of them is an Italian," he murmured to himself under his breath.

"Are they after me—is it a trap?"

And then he fell to studying the features of the two more closely and yet being careful to manage the matter so that the others would not suspect that they were the object of an unusual scrutiny.

At last he fancied he had penetrated the disguise of one of them.

An unconscious movement on the part of Tripoli revealed his identity to the monster scoundrel.

"So, so, you are quick on my track!" Gypsy Wolf muttered between his teeth.

"You are a perfect bloodhound, and death alone will keep you quiet, I fancy."

And then into the brain of the hunted man came a monstrous scheme.

Why should he not end the matter for good and all by making an end to this foe who, not satisfied with baffling his plans in the mansion of Raven Towers, was now following so closely upon his track?

The scheme was not an easy one, and yet it could be worked.

Under pretense of wishing to discuss the game which the strangers had proposed at length, he would invite his dusky foe to accompany him to his room in the upper part of the building, and there, if he could induce him to drink—and there wasn't much doubt about that—it would be an easy matter to drug his liquor, and so get him completely in his power.

No sooner had this scheme entered his brain than he determined to carry it into execution.

"Pablo, this game that these gentlemen propose is a good one, I think," he observed. "But this is no place to discuss the matter. It is too public."

"We shall attract attention, and the first thing we know some sneaking spy will get his eyes upon us, and then there will be trouble."

"Yes, yes, that is true," the host observed, with a nervous glance around, as though to assure himself that no spies were lurking near.

"Suppose this gentleman"—and he nodded to the Dusky Detective—"comes up-stairs with me to my room, and there we can talk the matter over without danger of any one being able to overhear our conversation."

"It is a good idea," Tripoli remarked, immediately, for the thought occurred to him that if he succeeded in getting a chance at the Gypsy Wolf without any one being by to render him assistance, he would most surely make him a prisoner.

"Come up-stairs then, and it will not take us long to fix up the affair," Gypsy Wolf remarked as he rose to his feet.

There were two ways of reaching the upper stories of the building on the ground floor of which the saloon was situated.

One was through the saloon and the other by the entry which gave access to the street by the side of the saloon.

After the two departed, Pablo and Gordon also quitted the room, the host to attend to his customers, and the other sauntered out the front door and took up a position at one side of the house where the entry gave access to the upper part of the building.

He had guessed his companion's game.

The Dusky Detective had gone with the scoundrel in order to get a chance to surprise and make a prisoner of him.

And now it was "on the cards" for him to warn the disguised detectives the moment they made their appearance in the neighborhood, of the game that was going on, so that they might be able to assist Tripoli if he needed aid.

By a carelessly-put question he had succeeded in ascertaining the exact location of the room occupied by the desperado, the host never suspecting that there was any harm in answering the query.

If he had known that the Gypsy Wolf was "wanted" by the police he would have been more careful, but on this point he was completely ignorant.

The Wolf led the way to his apartment which was a good-sized back room on the second floor.

The first move of the desperado was to light the lamp, the second to produce a bottle of brandy and a couple of glasses from the closet.

These he placed upon the table and then invited his visitor to be seated.

Wolf spoke Italian as fluently almost as a native, and in that language all the conversation had been carried on.

But now he said, as he filled out two glasses of brandy:

"You speak English, eh?"

"Not good English," replied the Dusky Detective, with a capital imitation of the Italian who had not yet mastered the tongue of his adopted land.

"Oh, well, we can talk in Italian, then; it makes no difference to me. I speak one language about as well as the other."

"Have a little brandy?" he asked, as he pushed the glass over invitingly toward the other.

"I don't know how you'll like it, but that thin, sour wine of Pablo's tastes more like vinegar than anything else."

"When I drink I want something to warm me up—something that has some fire about it."

"That's my idea," Tripoli replied. "Pablo's wine is poor stuff."

And then the two drank.

"Don't be afraid of it—there's plenty more," the Wolf said, pushing the bottle over toward the other.

And all through the conversation he kept urging his guest to drink, nor did he spare the brandy himself; and taking advantage of

a favorable moment, he dropped a narcotic into the glass of Tripoli.

The Dusky Detective was not on his guard against such a trick as this, for he had not the slightest suspicion that his disguise had been penetrated.

Soon the drug took effect, and Tripoli sunk to sleep.

The Wolf searched him and removed his weapons, then finding a pair of handcuffs in his pocket, snapped them on his wrists.

This done, he sat down to wait until the senseless man should wake from his stupor so that he could taunt him with his failure.

Gradually, as time wore on, the effect of the drug passed away.

CHAPTER XXX.

BROUGHT TO BAY.

WITH a fiendish look of triumph upon his face Weathercroft approached his victim.

Tripoli opened his eyes and blinked at the other, as a man would naturally do recovering from the effect of strong stimulant which had been powerful enough to bring confusion upon the senses.

"Are you sensible enough to understand what I am saying to you?" the arch villain inquired.

"Oh, yes, I think I am."

"You see, I know you as well as you know me."

"I suppose you begin to understand about this time that you have been drugged," and the scoundrel laughed as though he conceived he had given utterance to a very good joke.

"Yes, I think I understand it now, but I supposed the effect was produced by the badness of the liquor."

"Oh, no; from what I have seen of your drinking capabilities I believe you have a head that can stand any amount of liquor, no matter how vile the decoction may be."

"If you remember I tested your powers in that line one night, when I thought I would be able to fuddle your senses with brandy so as to make you talk, but the attempt was a most decided failure."

"In fact if any unprejudiced party had witnessed the interview they would have been apt to declare that instead of me getting you drunk it was you who got me drunk," and then the rascal chuckled again.

It was evident that he was hugely enjoying the affair.

"Sober or drunk your tongue did not betray your secrets," the Dusky Detective remarked.

"You can trust me to keep a quiet tongue in my head; I was brought up in that way; but to come to business, do you know why I wished to make you talk?"

"Because you had been up to some deviltry and was afraid I suspected you."

"Well, that was one reason but I had another and a more powerful one. I had recognized you," and the speaker glared, ferociously, in the face of the prisoner.

"You recognized me?" and there was an inquiring look upon the dark face of the other.

"Yes, although I never had met you before, but the first time I encountered you I detected that there was a familiar look to your face, and the fact puzzled me, for I could not recall the circumstance of ever having met you, or any one who looked like you, and at the same time the impression came that you were fated to prove dangerous to me."

"I racked my brain to account for these strange things, and at last the truth flashed suddenly upon me."

"When Reginald Ashburnham died I stood by his bedside, and in his last moments, when he writhed in mortal agony, his face assumed a strange expression—an expression like to the one which often appears upon your own at certain occasions, and then in an old desk which formerly belonged to Ashburnham I came across an old photograph of a young man taken some ten or twelve years ago."

"It was your likeness, and upon its back was scribbled in Reginald Ashburnham's hand the inscription:

"My dear brother Stephen."

"The truth flashed upon me immediately. The report that Stephen Ashburnham had died abroad in foreign lands was a lie."

"Stephen Ashburnham was alive, had re-

turned to his native land and secured admission to Raven Towers under a false name, and you were he; and then I understood why my subtle instinct had warned me of danger."

"Your presentiment did not deceive you," the Dusky Detective observed.

"I am Stephen Ashburnham, and I came to Raven Towers for the express purpose of hunting down the evil spirit, which, like a vampire, had taken up his quarters in the old mansion and was feeding fat upon the blood of its inmates."

An expression of rage appeared upon the face of Weathercroft.

"My presentiments never deceive me; I knew you were dangerous from the first," he cried.

"And I from the first suspected that you were the evil spirit, and I made up my mind to discover and denounce you."

"Your attempt has not been a success," the other observed, with a sneer.

"You managed to make Raven Towers too hot to hold me and drove me forth a fugitive, but I had provided for just such an event and had taken care to enrich myself liberally before the crisis came."

"I suppose you suspect now that I was responsible for the midnight attack upon you?"

Tripoli, or Stephen Ashburnham, as we must hereafter call him—nodded.

"And in my management of that matter I did not use my usual good judgment," the schemer remarked, with a scowl, as he reflected upon the past.

"When I had you safe in the vault I ought to have killed you, but a squeamish weakness against dipping my hands in your blood made me shut you up in the cell."

"But when I got up stairs and came to reflect on the matter I saw I was making a fool of myself and that, for my own safety, I must put an end to your existence."

"I went to the vault, discovered that you had escaped and instantly came to the conclusion that the jig was up and the quicker I got out of harm's way the better."

"But now again I have got you though and I will take precious good care that you don't escape me, this time."

"You are wise to kill me for if I live I am certain to place the hangman's rope around your neck."

The other started as though he had been stricken in the face.

"Bah! What have I done to deserve such a fate?"

"Committed some fiendish murders," the Dusky Detective replied, sternly.

"First, by means of secret poison you took the life of Reginald Ashburnham, and then by the aid of your confederate, Clement Bridges, you kidnapped Mrs. Ashburnham, and shut her up in the secret vaults underneath Raven Towers."

"You quarreled with your tool after this work was done and murdered him by throwing him down a pit in the vault, and there the man died a fearful death, but he managed to write an account of what had been done before death overtook him, and that confession amply proves your guilt."

For a moment the arch villain was astounded by this disclosure, so entirely unexpected, but he soon recovered himself, and shook his clinched fist fiercely in the face of the other.

"You are an idiot, Stephen Ashburnham, to tell me these things, for by so doing you have made your death certain."

"I will kill you with my own hand!"

"And you are right, too, in your statement. I did poison Reginald Ashburnham, for I thought that after he was out of the way I could win the wife, but she was a proud minx, and when I ventured to press my suit she scorned me, and that very night she disappeared."

"With Bridges's help I conveyed her to the vault, and then my tool turned against me, and I slew him without remorse."

"The woman I left to die like a dog, and now the same fate will come to you!"

The scoundrel thrust his hand into his breast, as if to draw a weapon.

The Dusky Detective sprang to his feet, and with his manacled hands, before the other could make a movement to defend himself, felled Gypsy Wolf like a log.

Then the police came rushing into the room.

The villain had been entrapped, his con-

fession overheard and proof enough against him secured to hang a dozen men.

Struggling like a maniac, he was borne away.

In the street he managed to break loose from his captors, but a pistol-bullet cut short his mad dash for liberty, and cheated the gallows of its prey.

When the police hastened to pick him up, the agonies of death convulsed his form. A few painful struggles, and the soul of the bold, bad man quitted its earthly tenement.

The chase was ended, and with the death of the desperado our tale must close.

A few more words of explanation and our task is done.

Gordon was richly rewarded by Stephen Ashburnham for the aid he had rendered, a thousand dollars being bestowed upon him in consideration of his services.

"Try and lead a different life," was the counsel of the generous giver.

"I will, and as long as the money lasts no man on earth will lead a more upright life, but when it's gone—well, as the Mexicans say, who knows?"

As the reader probably anticipates, the avenger basking in the smiles of the beautiful Constance told his soft tale and was a thriving wooer.

They were married, not at Raven Towers but in the country church near by, and started immediately on their wedding tour.

That very afternoon Raven Towers was burned to the ground.

"Fired by an incendiary!" was the general cry, and Paddy the Gossoon gravely nodded his head, as if he believed the statement.

All the insurance upon the building having expired, there wasn't any one to bother about the matter, and so the truth was never known.

It was never rebuilt, for the owner believed the spot was an unlucky one, and so the young trees and the wild vines now cluster thick around the ruins of Raven Towers.

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